ASIAN AMERICAN PASTORS' EMBEDDED THEOLOGY OF SUICIDE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ASIAN AMERICAN PASTORS

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of

Claremont School of Theology

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Anna Cho

May 2023

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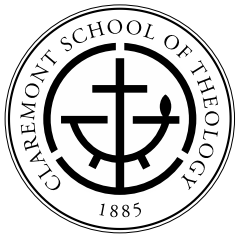

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Abstract

Asian American Pastor's Embedded Theology of Suicide: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Asian American Pastors

Anna Cho

Asian Americans' suicide rate continues to rise as the highest rate among ethnic groups. Yet little research is available that seeks to understand the lived experiences of Asian Americans about suicide. Even less is known about Asian American Christians' understandings of suicide, creating a lack of spiritual care resources that offer a culturally appropriate response to suicide in Asian American churches. This study was designed to understand the first-hand experience of Asian American Christians in relation to suicide by employing a phenomenological methodology to understand the phenomena of the lived experience of Asian American pastors in relation to suicide. Four key themes were drawn from this study: encountering suicide, developing theological imagination, filtering through a cultural lens, and sharing our/*ou-ri* stories. Asian American pastors' engagement with suicide leads to a deliberative theology that is either life-giving or life-limiting. These findings illustrate the importance of salient cultural factors in Asian American Christians. The study concludes by advocating for process theology of suicide as an alternative framework to address suicide in a shame-oriented culture found in Asian American faith communities, with culturally appropriate practical suggestions.

Acknowledgments

It has taken twelve years for this day to come. I thank God and their undeniable power of love and grace. I want to thank the people who have offered me a space to feel safe. You became my sanctuary and my rope. I want to thank the people who have ushered their presence, gifts, and sacred care for all parts of me. I want to thank those who have availed themselves as an extension of support and encouragement rooted in love and friendship. Thank you to my advisor, Dr. Duane R. Bidwell, for embodying kindness over the decade with unconditional backing spiritually, academically, and personally. I want to thank my dissertation committee member, Dr. K. Samuel Lee, for seeing me through and especially helping me break through impossible barriers. To Dr. Frank Rogers, I am grateful for his rare, admirable gifts of genuine kindness and compassion during times of war toward peace. I am thankful for my dear friends from Claremont—Bo Sanders, Marlene Ferreras, Katherine Rand, Josh T. Morris, Dilys Brooks, Dot Saunders-Perez, Hannah Ka, Sue Kim Park, Kyunghwa Song, Won-Seok Yuh, Gonghee Elly Rhee, James Kang—and my instructor Dr. Kathleen Greider. My therapist Max Wilson who held me with gentleness and allowed me to find my voice. I want to thank the courageous and selfless participants who have shared their experiences so that we as a collective might begin to shift, breaking the silence of suicide. For emotional support, Stephanie Ahn Mathis, Erin Martin, Miharu Yamamoto, Nicholle Ortiz, Jessica Lynn Taylor, and my in-laws Chang-Soon Ok and Hyun Sang Kyu. I want to include Adam Pranica and Benjamin Harrison of the GreatestGen and GreatestTrek podcast in my gratitude for entertaining my nights with Star Trek and advocating mental health.

I want to thank my family for believing in me despite my disbelief. Ou-ri mom, Hye Soon Cho ou-ri dad, Kyung Yual Cho; and ou-ri brother, Paul, thank you for showing me your

love in the most tangible way possible. To sweet Maple, our cat for her companion. My little Elijah Shine, you are our brightest star and life. Thank you for giving me the joy of growing up with you. I want to thank my greatest supporter and companion, husband, Dylan Seokjin Hyun, for his unyielding encouragement and love, literally with a cup of hot coffee first thing in the morning every single day. I love you, and I love you more every day.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

When my first love ended our relationship, I became what I later named as suicidal. The devastation of the breakup, the secrecy of earlier being sexually assaulted as an immigrant child, and the shame I had woefully internalized as an Asian pastor's kid—all these came together and rose to a head inside of me. While I contemplated suicide as an eighth-grader, what prevented me from following through—more than the fear of burning in hell for my sins—was my inability to reconcile myself with the possibility that my family would be judged harshly *by their own church family* if I went through with my plans. I could not bear the thought of them feeling ashamed or actively being shamed. I never completely understood my experience back then. Still, it sufficiently concerned my reserved parents (who generally did not seek medical attention until the situation was critical) that they pulled me out of school to be checked by a medical doctor. As an adult, pastor, mother, and scholar, I now reflect on the multiple critical variables that shaped my identity as an immigrant Asian American Christian. I wonder, would I still be concerned about the shame following the action of taking my life in today's context? No, I would not be worried about shame but about the dead silence that would ensue in Asian American churches after another suicide.

Suicide

When the headlines flash with the news of a celebrity taking their own life, we may think it is an isolated event. But suicide touches every life. Suicide cuts across all ages, gender identities and expressions, income and socioeconomic statuses, and racial and religious groups. From my years of serving and intersecting with Asian American faith communities and churches as an Asian American, I now know that Asians are not immune from mental illness and suicide. It might be the case that Asians and those who closely identify with Asian culture may find such

experiences more challenging. Silence and the stereotypes of the model minority myth are socioeconomically and culturally reinforced in the spaces we occupy, alongside the added demands of preserving Asian values. These all come at the expense of Asian Americans' emotional and mental wellness.

Cultural barriers have been combined with theological assumptions—such as an outdated theology of suicide as a mortal sin along with the cultural demands of saving face, "or the avoidance of bringing shame to both oneself and others"—and these can have an enduring and costly spiritual, social, cultural, and intergenerational effect on the well-being of Asian Americans.[1] There is already a dearth in the scientific literature about suicide among Asian Americans that might shed light on specific risk factors, barriers, and how religiosity impacts the well-being of Asian Americans. Christians bear the burden of understanding mental illness and suicide in light of what has been taught previously, and Asian faith leaders are placed in a life-and-death role of disseminating information and teaching about mental illness and suicide and how they can be understood. But, too often, tragedy occurs, and many Asian American Christians resort to beliefs and values that are probably at odds with their lived experiences. We must tackle and examine the silence around suicide in our communities; if we do not, many Asian Americans will continue to have theologically poor understandings of suicide that do not offer much hope, while the stigma of mental illness runs rampant underneath our struggles.

Initial Research Question

My initial research idea was to seek to understand the lived experiences of Asian American suicide loss survivors, meaning those who had lost a loved one to suicide. What drove me, of course, was my childhood experience, but also a desire for my community to address the

[1] Sharon M. Tan, "Marriage, Family, and Parenting," in *Asian American Christian Ethics: Voices, Methods, Issues*, ed. Grace Y. Kao and Ilsup Ahn (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 46.

unique issues that Asian Americans face without much support. My aim was to understand the silence in many churches today surrounding suicide and how Asian American pastors serve as a conduit to create positive change. If churches understood the first-hand experiences of those who have lost loved ones to suicide and how that loss felt to them, then I hoped that faith communities would respond faithfully in ways that better supported healing and prevention.

However, months of unsuccessful attempts to recruit participants for the study were revealing and profoundly disheartening. The lack of success was due to more than being stuck in a global pandemic. Although studies suggest that Asian Americans have one of the highest suicide rates of all races or ethnicities in the United States, I had a lack of success in recruiting Asian American suicide loss survivors. Many pastors I contacted did not know which people in their churches' pews were suicide loss survivors. Reaching out to bereavement groups did not yield better results, a finding consistent with studies that suggest Asian Americans avail themselves of group therapy the least of all ethnic and racial groups. Facilitators of suicide-loss grief groups shared that they had zero to one Asian American participants in their years of group work. So, instead of searching for "hidden" suicide loss survivors, I began to wonder, "What are the experiences of Asian American pastors regarding suicide?"

New Research Question

As a result, I revised my research question. It became a set of questions: "What is the embedded theology of suicide among Asian American pastors who are serving or have served in predominantly Asian faith contexts? In other words, what are their current lived understandings and practical theologies of suicide? Are there discrepancies between their operating theologies and how those theologies are translated into the life of their churches? And how do those theologies manifest (or not) in their ministerial work?" Researching the embedded theologies of

suicide among Asian American pastors who are serving or have served as pastoral leaders in Christian Asian American parish settings would, I believe, give my topic the attention that it deserves.

When it comes to mental health and suicide, the cultural and spiritual nuances of shame and stigma that are attached to the idea of needing help from outside the family can play a deceptively significant role in hindering Asian Americans from bringing their whole-hearted, broken selves—their suffering selves—to the table (or the pastor's study). When the church is silent on suicide, we inadvertently teach that suicide is a taboo subject—and, by extension, those affected by suicide are beyond our purview of care. This silence, at a minimum, reinforces outdated and damaging theological assumptions and biases that contribute to why Christian communities often ignore the very topic of suicide, along with those affected by it. Even if one is unfamiliar with theological stances that treat suicide as a taboo subject, one can quickly see how silencing or even forbidding conversations about suicide can lead congregations to believe that suicide is sinful.

If the word *suicide* cannot be uttered in the church, perhaps many imagine that God is silent when it comes to suicide. Operative theologies that say suicide is wrong, sinful, and shameful inform Asian Americans' values and beliefs, implicitly and explicitly intersecting with their embedded culture. Such theological beliefs also manifest themselves in the spiritual practices (or lack thereof) that influence Asian Americans' emotional, physical, and spiritual responses to life events, especially crises.

Suicide among Asian Americans

Suicide rates in Asian countries like Korea, Japan, and China are among the highest in the world, with an exceptionally high frequency of suicide among Korean Americans.[2] South Korea's rate of suicide mortality nearly tripled from 1990 to 2010, and it had the highest rate of all developed countries in 2020.[3] For comparison, South Korea (from here on, just Korea) had 28.5 suicides per 100,000 in 2020, while the USA experienced about half of that at 13.0 per 100,000.[4]

Contrary to the expected low rate of suicide mortality among Asian Americans, suicide has been found to be the leading cause of death for Asian Americans ages 20-24, the second leading cause of death for Asian Americans aged 10-19 and 25-34, and, among Asian American females, it is the leading cause of death for 10-14-year-olds, 20-24-year-olds, and the elderly.[5] However, recent events and developments have led to a wide variation between Asian American subgroups—Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese—and this, too, calls for immediate attention.

The incomprehensible number of suicides in our communities does not always yield more open discussions within circles of families, friends, and communities. One of the tragedies that occurs with families affected by suicide is that family members feel unable to talk openly about their loss and, in many cases, even admit to it.[6] On the contrary, a tragic event like suicide will likely shut down conversations in Asian communities. Unlike other deaths, death by suicide,

[2] Katherine G. Hastings et al., "Leading Causes of Death among Asian American Subgroups (2003–2011)," *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 4 (April 27, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0124341.

[3] OECD, *Society at a Glance 2019*: *OECD Social Indicators* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019), 116, https://doi.org/10.1787/soc_glance-2019-en.

[4] "Facts About Suicide," Suicide Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last reviewed February 24, 2022, https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/facts/index.html.

[5] Hastings et al., "Leading Causes of Death among Asian American Subgroups."

[6] G. Lloyd Carr and Gwendolyn C. Carr, *Fierce Goodbye: Living in the Shadow of Suicide* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004), 123.

which can be sudden, unexpected, or even violent, still carries a strongly negative stigma that greatly hinders people from reaching out. The other aspect of this dilemma is that most people, and faith communities in particular, do not know how to respond to a tragedy like suicide when trying to offer comfort. Even well intended people may reinforce outdated myths that are unhelpful for survivors to grieve.

Based on Asian American studies, Leong and Lau note that culturally based affective responses, such as feelings of shame and stigma, may act as barriers to Asian Americans seeking help.[7] The social stigma around mental illness is pervasive among Americans, but Asian and Asian American communities are thought to feel even more stigmatized by such problems. Individuals in the Asian American community realize that seeking mental health care will bring shame on their families.[8] For example, Park et al.'s recent study of Koreans showed that underutilization of mental health services by the elderly cohort was correlated with stigma.[9] It is also worth noting that individuals with roots in Asian cultures—cultures that value the goals of the collective over individual goals—often perceive disclosure of personal problems as bringing shame to the family. Thus, this collective value orientation becomes a barrier to an individual's willingness to accept the use of mental health services.[10]

Most poignantly, Augsberger et al. have quantitatively shown that the underutilization of mental health services continues to be seen in 1.5- and second-generation Asian American

[7] Frederick T. L. Leong and Anna S. L. Lau, "Barriers to Providing Effective Mental Health Services to Asian Americans," *Mental Health Services Research* 3, no. 4 (December 2001): 201-14.

[8] Joyce P. Chu and Stanley Sue, "Asian American Mental Health: What We Know and What We Don't Know," *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 3, no. 1 (June 2011): 4, https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1026.

[9] Jee Eun Park et al., "Impact of Stigma on Use of Mental Health Services by Elderly Koreans," *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 50, no. 5 (May 2015): 757–66, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-014-0991-0.

[10] Man Keung Ho, "Social Group Work with Asian/Pacific-Americans," *Social Work with Groups* 7, no. 3 (August 16, 1984): 49–61, https://doi.org/10.1300/J009v07n03_06.

children of immigrants. Specifically, this study showed that family and community stigmas attached to mental health problems and mental health services negatively influenced participants' use of mental health services.[11] This is an important reminder that unaddressed issues such as mental illness and the stigma attached to suicide will have long-term effects on a community. A common theme in the studies I have referenced is how cultural stigmas (fear of ostracism from the *community* and *community impact from the cultural model of suicide*) and shame disproportionately impact Asian Americans' use of mental health services.[12] Research suggests that Asian Americans engage in less help-seeking behavior, and they delay or forgo mental health care, reinforcing the "model minority" myth that Asian Americans experience few, if any, social and psychological problems in their adjustment to living in the US as compared to non-Asian Americans.[13] But in that low help-seeking behavior, research has found that Asians and Asian Americans were generally more likely to seek and receive mental health services from religious/spiritual advisors than a mental health psychiatrist (a medical provider) or a mental health specialist.[14] Furthermore, given a choice, Asian Americans would prefer to seek care and counseling from religious leaders (rather than, say, from secular therapists and psychiatrists).[15]

Nonetheless, there is little literature describing how Asian American clergy view suicide or that offers resources for Asian American congregations encountering suicide in their

[11] Astraea Augsberger et al., "Factors Influencing the Underutilization of Mental Health Services among Asian American Women with a History of Depression and Suicide," *BMC Health Services Research* 15, no. 542 (December 8, 2015): 1-11, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-015-1191-7.

[12] Augsberger et al., "Factors Influencing the Underutilization of Mental Health Services."

[13] Akihiko Masuda and Matthew S. Boone, "Mental Health Stigma, Self-Concealment, and Help-Seeking Attitudes among Asian American and European American College Students with No Help-Seeking Experience," *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling* 33, no. 4 (December 2011): 266–79.

[14] Dolly A. John and David R. Williams, "Mental Health Service Use from a Religious or Spiritual Advisor among Asian Americans," *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* 6, no. 6 (December 2013): 599–605, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2013.03.009.

[15] Jennifer Abe-Kim et al., "Use of Mental Health-Related Services among Immigrant and US-Born Asian Americans: Results from the National Latino and Asian American Study," *American Journal of Public Health* 97, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 91–98, https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2006.098541.

communities. Instead, numerous studies show that clergy serve as gatekeepers in their churches. As a gatekeeper in a church, a clergyperson can reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness and the incidences of suicide by identifying individuals at risk of suicide, providing support, and referring them to an appropriate professional while promoting connection.[16] But clergy have significant limitations in their evaluative and referral skills, including being able to identify emotional distress and suicide lethality, which makes them suboptimal sources of assistance for those who are in distress.[17]

In the fifth century CE, Augustine wrote in *The City of God* that Exodus 20:13, "Thou shall not murder," means that Christians have no authority to take a person's life, either their own or that of another.[18] Some eight hundred years later, Thomas Aquinas affirmed Augustine's position by insisting that "suicide is always a mortal sin."[19] These words of Augustine and Aquinas proved to be a foundation for years of oppression and condemnation of those who died by suicide and of suicide survivors. In the Middle Ages, even though she or he was dead, a person found guilty of suicide was subject to punishment, such as forfeiture of property and improper burial.[20] In many cultures, families of suicide victims are ostracized by society and additionally burdened with having their property confiscated.[21] Over the centuries, judgmental words born of harmful theologies condemning suicide have affected how faith communities have understood and made sense of suicide. If the powerful words of a church patriarch like Augustine

[16] John Potter, "Is Suicide the Unforgivable Sin? Understanding Suicide, Stigma, and Salvation through Two Christian Perspectives," *Religions* 12, no. 11 (2021): 15–16, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110987.

[17] Christopher G. Ellison et al., "The Clergy as a Source of Mental Health Assistance: What Americans Believe," *Review of Religious Research* 48, no. 2 (2006): 192.

[18] Townsend and Bagby, *Suicide,* 16.

[19] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (n.p.: Benziger Bros., 1947), 2.64.5, https://ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/SS/SS064.html.

[20] Alexander Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages*, vol. 1, *The Violent against Themselves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 29, 76, EBSCOhost.

[21] Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages*, 1:40, 240.

of Hippo have shaped our understanding of what life and death are, certainly faith communities have an important—if not *the most important*—role in undoing the harm perpetuated in our communities.

Various organizations recognize the vital role faith communities play in preventing, intervening in, and preventing mental health issues and suicide. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Faith Communities Task Force of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, and the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) are a few organizations working alongside faith communities to equip leaders for prevention and education in religious settings.[22] This is done, of course, with the recognition that churches play a key role in providing spiritual, social, and psychological support to their members.

From the earliest days of immigration to the US, ethnic churches have been a backbone for Asian American communities. According to Park, Murgatroyd, Raynock, and Spillett, there is one Korean church for about every four hundred Koreans.[23] For Korean immigrants, the Korean church has been a "home away from home."[24] Some studies indicate that Asian Americans prefer praying, visiting churches, and seeking care within their cultural networks and faith communities to using community mental health services.[25] Naturally, clergy in ethnic churches often assume more than the traditional role of a religious leader; they are also social service providers, interpreters, and counselors. However, the extent to which Asian Americans

[22] Michael J. Donahue and Peter L. Benson, "Religion and the Well-Being of Adolescents," *Journal of Social Issues* 51, no. 2 (1995): 145-160, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1995.tb01328.x.

[23] Hae-Seong Park et al., "Relationship between Intrinsic–Extrinsic Religious Orientation and Depressive Symptoms in Korean Americans," *Counselling Psychology Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (1998): 315–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/09515079808254063.

[24] Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim, "Religious Participation of Korean Immigrants in the United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29, no. 1 (1990): 19–34, https://doi.org/10.2307/1387028.

[25] Dianne Wynaden et al., "Factors That Influence Asian Communities' Access to Mental Health Care," *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing* 14 (July 1, 2005): 88–95, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-0979.2005.00364.x.

seek mental health care from faith leaders is unclear, since there is a lack of studies on the matter.[26]

Given the vital role that clergy play as frontline mental health caregivers for parishioners, it is troubling to realize that little is known about clergy's perceived abilities and roles concerning mental healthcare and their likelihood to inquire about such matters.[27] Amy S. Hedman's study on Minnesota clergy's attitudes toward suicide prevention and their likelihood to inquire about suicidal thoughts and intent concluded that clergy were less likely to inquire about a parishioner's mental health in more complex situations of concern.[28] In addition, more than one-third of Christian clergy were either minimally prepared or entirely unprepared to provide postvention assistance to suicide survivors.[29] Out of one thousand Protestant pastors in the US, nearly half reported that they rarely or never addressed mental illness in their sermons.[30] This inattention to mental health alerts us to the necessity of Asian American faith communities working collaboratively toward eliminating the stigma associated with mental health needs in their communities. Stigmatizing attitudes and behaviors must be replaced with culturally nuanced and spiritually healthy ideas and practices.

Pastoral Theological Literature

Indeed, pastors are uniquely positioned to offer pastoral care that lessens the power of stigmatization by identifying ways to debunk taboos and stigma that are attached to anything connected with suicide. Asian Americans are challenged by culturally specific barriers that make

[26] Abe-Kim et al., "Use of Mental Health-Related Services," 91-98.

[27] Amy S. Hedman, "Minnesota Clergy's Attitudes on Suicide Prevention and Likelihood to Inquire about Suicidal Thoughts and Intent," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 19, no. 6 (July 2, 2016): 565–573, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2016.1216531.

[28] Hedman, "Minnesota Clergy's Attitudes on Suicide Prevention," 565-573.

[29] "New Study of Acute Mental Illness and Christian Faith," 8.

[30] "New Study of Acute Mental Illness and Christian Faith," 32.

it difficult for them to share openly and to seek help and receive care from their faith leaders.[31] Therefore, my research builds on Townsend's and Bidwell's contributions to care in the context of suicide. I use Carrie Doehring's method of reflexivity to unearth and examine Asian American pastors' embedded theologies of suicide and to understand the theologies operating in the lived experiences of Asian American pastors.

In the field of pastoral theology, Loren L. Townsend's book *Suicide: Pastoral Responses* provides pastoral theological responses to suicide grounded in a narrative-based model of pastoral intervention. He offers liberative praxis as a method to help caregivers provide care and theological reflection on suicide and to construct healing narratives in light of the gospel. However, Townsend's book does not address the specific barriers Asian American churches encounter in terms of speaking about mental health or the need to understand suicide in a culturally appropriate way. Townsend does note that suicidology is just now beginning to pay attention to how patriarchy plays a role in high levels of female self-destructive mental illness and attempted suicides.[32]

Duane R. Bidwell's essay "Wanting to Die: How to Prevent Suicide" lays out how churches can readily implement suicide prevention for youth, young adults, and suicidal adults in their congregations. Most poignantly, though, Bidwell brings to light findings from various studies showing that teens from cultural backgrounds that hold suicide in a negative or blaming light tend to forgo help, which coincides with studies on Asian American cultures.[33]

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[31] John and Williams, "Mental Health Service Use," 145-160.

[32] Loren L. Townsend, *Suicide: Pastoral Responses*, edited by Daniel G. Bagby (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 76.

[33] Duane R. Bidwell, "Wanting to Die: How to Prevent Suicide," in *The Church Leader's Counseling Resource Book: A Guide to Mental Health and Social Problems*, ed. Cynthia Franklin and Rowena Fong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 221.

Considering the foregoing, we can begin to understand how learning about the life experiences of Asian American pastors and their operational theologies regarding suicide can lead to ways to help alleviate the burdens that Asian American Christians carry and to insights into how they can educate their congregations on the topic of suicide.

Process Theological Literature

I use process theology as a theological framework in this dissertation because of its similar threads to Confucianism philosophy. Their similarities include the way that they prioritize ethical and moral principles and their understanding of inter-relationships, which can be expansive and healing enough to contain a difficult topic like suicide and help free people in their hearts and communities from their silent suffering. A process perspective states that reality is relational and a social process and asserts that, while past decisions provide and limit present possibilities, the future is open, even within these limits. Additionally, process theism states that God is love and God's power lies in persuasion, not coercion; God awaits our free response to work towards God's vision for the world.

Process theology argues that God fully shares our pain and hurts, unlike classical or traditional theological stances that might argue that suffering is a sign of God testing our faith. And if God wholly shares our deepest suffering, even with suicide, then perhaps it would be just as plausible to say God is not silent on the issue of suicide. Thus, in approaching a difficult subject matter like suicide, I use C. Robert Mesle's *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction* as a valuable tool in making meaning and better understanding our suffering and experience of evil against the backdrop of rather conservative classical theology.

I also utilize Monica A. Coleman's *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, particularly her process theological framework, to construct a helpful and faithful

worldview to make sense of tragedies like suicide in our midst. Although her book is intended to speak to the religious experiences of black women, her postmodern theology can also speak to the spiritual experiences of Asian Americans. She addresses suffering and evil and how to make meaning out of them in life-giving and healing ways.[34] I believe using process theology will give faith leaders and churches the theological framework to affirm that God desires wholeness for Asian Americans and life for the world's inhabitants. Process theology provides a compassionate and grace-filled theology that asserts that not all is lost.

Process theology emphasizes connection, relationship, and positive evolution. This is a helpful connection that ties in well with the topic of suicide. I believe the notion of unforgivable sin is ingrained in the minds of many Asian Americans, including Asian American pastors. I believe process theology offers sufficient room to intersect with cultures, religiosities, and lived theologies in ways that are life-giving and relevant to Asian American Christians.

Method

By delving deeply into the narratives of Asian American pastors on the topic of suicide, I began to unearth reasons for an absence of care for those struggling with mental health illness, to examine embedded theologies around suicide, and to bring forth an idea of the kind of care that is needed for Asian Americans and is not present at the moment within our faith congregations. One must first seek to hear and understand the experiences of those whose words and feelings have essentially been silenced and who have haphazardly been discouraged from breaking the taboo surrounding suicide.

This dissertation rests on the assumption that, by listening to the experiences of Asian American pastors and amplifying the voices of religious leaders, Asian American churches can

[34] Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 59-61.

begin to address their silence on the subject of suicide. The aim of this dissertation is threefold. First, I sought to listen to the lived experiences of Asian American pastors in relation to suicide. The foundation for this research is an understanding that human experience is a vehicle by which theologians explore the implications of embodied practice in faith communities. Second, my study aimed both to evaluate and address the specific barriers to mental health care that Asian American pastors experience due to systemic racism, such as being seen as a model minority, and due to cultural mores and norms. Conversation partners for this narrative assessment included practical theology, suicidology, Asian American studies, and pastoral care and theology. Third, this research sought to respond critically and theologically to the driving narratives of Asian American pastors by assessing the primary embedded beliefs that are operating actively in their ministries, especially around the topic of suicide, and to deconstruct the embedded theologies that inform Asian Americans about suicide in ways that are limiting and harmful. For this work, I engaged with practical theology, pastoral care and theology, and process theology. By addressing embedded theologies, churches and faith leaders can effectively care for Asian Americans who have often been neglected, ultimately reduce the number of silent sufferers, and facilitate the healing that preserves life and offers hope.

I used a phenomenological method of interviewing as the primary means by which I, as the researcher, attempted to understand and unpack the lived experiences of Asian American pastors in terms of suicide.[35] The strength of using an interpretive phenomenological method for this research was that it privileged the firsthand lived experiences and views of Asian American pastors regarding suicide. It also offered an intentional analysis of what was being reflected on

[35] John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018), 76.

and what insights were being gained, and it described the "how" and the "what" of experience.[36] The interviews were conducted through the lens of practical theology, and for my analysis, I used Richard R. Osmer's practical theological framework as a conceptual structure for gaining insight into my participants' lives. The gathered narratives of the lived experiences of Asian American pastors threw light on my descriptive-empirical efforts to understand what was going on. Then the interpretative task allowed several disciplines—Asian American studies, psychology, process theology, and pastoral theology—to come together in my effort to understand why such dynamics are occurring.[37] In addition, I used Carrie Doehring's approach to care to identify the embedded theologies currently lived out by Asian American pastors, with the hope of bringing insight into how faith leaders can participate in changing the legacy of suicide, especially in our Asian American churches and communities.

Audience

The primary intended audience for this research study is my dissertation committee members: Dr. Duane R. Bidwell, Dr. K. Samuel Lee, and Dr. Frank Rogers. Secondarily, this dissertation may be useful for academics such as practical and pastoral theologians and graduate students in mental health fields. Third, faith leaders involved in parish ministry may benefit from the understanding this work provides about the specific barriers Asian Americans face in talking about mental illness and suicide in their faith communities.

Scope and Limitations

My research aimed to understand the lived experiences and views of Asian American pastors in relation to suicide in order to examine what theologies are operating within Asian

[36] Frederick J. Wertz, *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research, and Intuitive Inquiry* (New York: Guilford Press, 2011), 91.

[37] Richard Robert Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 79-128.

American Christian communities and what might be done to address the high number of suicides among Asian Americans. My study was limited to the narratives of individuals in the US, specifically the Greater Northwest, California, and Hawaii, who were willing to share their personal views on suicide. Although it might be interesting to investigate the experiences of Asian and Asian American pastors in non-Asian or non-Asian American faith contexts, I did not focus on pastors in Asia or outside of the US or on Asian Americans who are part of faith communities that are not homogenously Asian. I also focused solely on understanding the lived experiences of Asian American Christians from Protestant denominations. I thickened my understanding of the lived experiences of Asian American pastors in Christian congregations and their views on suicide by utilizing current research on suicidology, Asian American studies, and pastoral theology. I advocate for process theology as a more favorable theological basis for addressing and understanding suicide, loss, and suffering than tradition theologies, but Asian American Christians may find it difficult to connect with process theology because it is too foreign and different.

While I am eager to shed light on the absence of care due to cultural and religious barriers for those in Asian American churches who are struggling with mental health issues or contemplating suicide, it may be the case that other Asian Americans are receiving some forms of care that are culturally coded and more acceptable outside of faith contexts. It may also be the case that we have yet to discover resources that are mitigating suicide in this population. Nonetheless, it is still valuable to explore how faith communities are attending to the theological and mental health needs of Asian Americans in terms of suicide by understanding the lived experiences of Asian American pastors and their views on suicide to excavate ways to offer soulful care in a culturally nuanced way.

Contributions

A recent report published by Stop AAPI Hate notes that "Asian Americans who have experienced racism are more stressed by anti-Asian hate than the [COVID-19] pandemic itself," and that "one in five Asian Americans who have experienced racism display racial trauma."[38] These realities must be considered and factored in as part of the struggle that Asian Americans go through daily and which affects their mental and spiritual wellness. The national and global crisis of individuals taking their own lives is not news. Instead, with the epidemic rise of suicide deaths in our communities, numerous studies have been published, one after the other, as articles or books in order to destigmatize suicide and to help suicide survivors—as well as caregiving professionals such as clinicians, pastors, school counselors, and educators—end the stigma around mental illness and suicide.

I hope my research serves as a resource in practical theology and pastoral theology that advocates for culturally and spiritually nuanced ways of addressing the silence surrounding suicide and mental illness in Asian faith contexts. Such a resource, I argue, can provide compassion-led, life-giving messages that attend to the specific needs of Asian Americans. I am also highly interested in bringing these concerns and findings to my spiritual home, the United Methodist denomination, and ethnic Methodist churches in the United States and across Asia. To lessen the power of stigma around suicide—especially in Asian American cultures—churches and institutions of faith have the distinct responsibility to put out a clear call to stop the harm and to provide healing for those who have been silenced and compelled to keep their pain hidden. Their new role must entail fully accompanying Asian Americans on their life's journeys, with an understanding of the gravitational forces working against Asian Americans in US culture that

[38] Anne Saw, Aggie J. Yellow Horse, and Russell Jeung, *Stop AAPI Hate Mental Health Report* (Stop AAPI Hate, May 27, 2021), 1, https://stopaapihate.org/mental-health-report/.

can cause suffering. Churches need to act to neutralize these forces and to provide support, care, and healing.

Outline of Dissertation Chapters

In this introduction, I have described how suicide has historically been viewed in Asian American cultures and faith communities, with these views being formed and shaped by Western Christian theologians. Through reviewing the historical implications of such views, I observed that contemporary cultural and pastoral responses are still tainted by negative legacies about suicide that contribute to strengthening the power of the stigma that lingers on in our communities, including our faith communities. In terms of mental illness and suicide, I noted the cultural and religious barriers preventing Asian Americans from seeking and receiving the necessary care and attention they need. Hence, I described why listening to and understanding Asian Americans' experiences and their views of suicide might provide insight into the embedded theologies that influence the lives of Asian Americans in Asian American faith contexts.

Chapter 2 consists of a literature review of a conglomerate of published works within the fields of pastoral theology, suicidology, practical theology, pastoral psychology, Asian studies, and process theology. The literature review directly looks at barriers that Asian Americans face in their faith contexts and conveys the need to understand the lived experiences of Asian American Christians in relation to suicide in order to address the stigma around suicide, shame, and the minimal responses from churches to care for suicide loss survivors and everyone affected by suicide.

In chapter 3, I discuss the qualitative methodological approach I utilized to help me understand Asian American pastors' views of and experiences with suicide. Through in-depth,

semi-structured interviews, I collected pastors' narratives regarding suicide, and I then used interpretative phenomenology as an empirical method to explore the meaning of their shared experiences of suicide and to uncover their embedded theologies and beliefs. In this chapter, I assert that practical theology begins with human experiences, meaning such experiences become the data sources to be used and analyzed as empirical data. Practical theology, phenomenology, and Carrie Doehring's approach to pastoral care came into play in my research to illuminate how embedded theologies, coupled with cultural values, play a critical role in Asian American pastors' responses to suicide. I introduce Richard R. Osmer's four core tasks of practical theology and how I used them as guides in this study and in the interpretation of my findings. In addition, Doehring's intercultural lens was used to interpret embedded theologies and to gain insight into the necessary means for creating a more deliberative and intentional theology that is compassion-led and life-giving.

Chapter 4, "Findings," presents the outcomes and learnings that surfaced from interviewing Asian American pastors. It provides a fuller narrative of interpretations, analyzes data, and highlights the embedded theologies that Asian American pastors exhibited. The descriptions of Asian American pastors' views on suicide are shared with the aim that they will serve as a valuable resource in the fields of practical theology, pastoral theology, and Asian American studies, which, at this point, do not have such a resource. I use all the insights gained through these findings to advocate for more culturally and spiritually nuanced care that soothes the distress of suicide survivors in our families, communities, and congregations.

Chapter 5 focuses on capturing the urgent need to fill the void of silence concerning mental illness and suicide with life-giving messages conducive to the healing of Asian Americans, especially in Asian American churches. In this chapter, I explain how practical

theology can be instrumental in deconstructing unhelpful theologies and creating intentional ones. An intentional theology addresses the embedded theologies breathed and lived in Asian American congregations. I go on to name steps that can be taken and more culturally nuanced ways through which churches, faith leaders, and communities can respond to Asian Americans dealing with mental illness and the taboo surrounding the topic of suicide. I offer suggestions of culturally and spiritually nuanced ways that faith communities can better address the stigma around suicide, and how such communities can prevent, intervene in, and provide postvention strategies for suicide that will break the cycle of silence around suicide.

The concluding chapter reiterates how this research came about and how the study aimed to become an added resource and provide information currently unavailable to address the specific needs of Asian Americans regarding suicide. It does so in two ways: one, by delving into the operating embedded theologies within Asian American pastors and churches; and two, by providing better, more culturally nuanced ways that faith communities can proactively address the silence on the topic of suicide. Thus, I summarize my findings and conclusions and end with suggestions for further research and some additional recommendations for Asian American faith communities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Suicide is not a new or unfamiliar term within our daily lives. Suicide, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), is "death caused by injuring oneself with the intent to die."[1] Researchers in the field of suicidology and scholars of psychosociology have long postulated that a suicide loss directly impacts at least six individuals. The number six was challenged recently when Cerel et al. found that the number of people directly affected by a suicide is instead much greater; on average, each suicide affects 135 people who knew the person.[2] This suggests that the circle of those affected by suicide is much more expansive.

More alarming is that the number of deaths due to suicide is likely underestimated. Even one hundred years after Durkheim's assertion that national suicide rates had some degree of error, recent studies continue to find a pattern in which suicides are underreported locally, nationally, and globally.[3] How much the number of deaths by suicide is undercounted varies according to how promptly an investigation of the death is done and how often suicides are misattributed to other causes of death. Accurately recording a death as a suicide must satisfy high standards, such as testimony from credible witnesses, psychiatric records, or some form of communication of suicidal intent left before a suicide death.[4] There is also variance in whether medical and legal authorities are willing to rule a death as a suicide, a decision that may depend on the method used and whether it was more active (like drowning) or less active (like

[1] "Facts about Suicide," Suicide Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last reviewed April 6, 2023, https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/definitions.html.

[2] Julie Cerel et al., "How Many People Are Exposed to Suicide? Not Six," *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 49, no. 2 (April 2019): 529–34, https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12450.

[3] Cynthia A. Claassen et al., "National Suicide Rates a Century after Durkheim: Do We Know Enough to Estimate Error?" *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior* 40, no. 3 (June 2010): 193–223, http://dx.doi.org/10.1521/suli.2010.40.3.193.

[4] "Current Trends Operational Criteria for Determining Suicide," *MMWR* 37, no. 50 (December 23, 1988): 773–74, 779–80, https://wonder.cdc.gov/wonder/prevguid/p0000164/p0000164.asp.

poisoning).[5] The number of suicides is likely even higher than statistics suggest when one considers deaths from intentional automobile accidents and drug overdoses, deaths resulting from patterns of destructive behavior, and those suicides that families cover up.[6] In many cases, families conceal a suicide death, resisting the label for fear of ostracism, social stigma, and loss of insurance benefits.

O'Carroll notes that collecting data on suicide mortality in Asian American subgroups is particularly difficult due to sociocultural reasons, underreporting, and misclassifications.[7] In cases of elderly people's deaths, when there is no indication of psychiatric illness in the past, authorities are susceptible to ruling the death as something other than suicide, like death by natural causes, forgoing investigation altogether. Other researchers emphasize that the stigma of suicide and fear of social scrutiny and condemnation can also serve as motivators to hide one's intention or the intention of a loved one, and officials may be encouraged to withhold evidence in order to demonstrate cultural and religious sensitivity to affected family members.[8] For these reasons, though we may not know the actual number of deaths due to suicide nor the number of people impacted by suicide, we can safely conclude that such numbers are always higher than those that are reported. Considering these variables is helpful for understanding suicides in the Asian American population.

[5] Shelly S. Bakst et al., "The Accuracy of Suicide Statistics: Are True Suicide Deaths Misclassified?," *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 51, no. 1 (January 2016): 115–23, http://dx.doi.org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s00127-015-1119-x.

[6] Christopher Lukas and Henry M. Seiden, *Silent Grief: Living in the Wake of Suicide*, rev. ed. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007), 28, http://www.123library.org/book_details/?id=2355.

[7] Patrick O'Carroll, "A Consideration of the Validity and Reliability of Suicide Mortality Data," *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1943-278X.1989.tb00362.x.

[8] Bakst et al., "The Accuracy of Suicide Statistics," 116.

Asian Americans and Suicide

The rate of suicide among Asian Americans has been historically lower than that of Caucasians or other ethnic groups, like American Indians/Alaska Natives, and has thus been understudied. In addition, statistics show that suicide mortality is relatively low among non-Hispanic Blacks, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics compared to the suicide rates among American Indians/Alaska Natives and non-Hispanic Whites (NHWs).[9] However, as Holland and Palaniappan point out, the suicide rates for these racial/ethnic groups obscure the mortality trends of highly heterogeneous populations by lumping subgroups together and aggregating their data.[10] Contrary to the expected lower suicide rates of Asian Americans than Caucasians and other ethnic groups, disaggregated data for Asian Americans yielded higher suicide deaths for some Asian American groups.[11] For example, there is one suicide in every twenty deaths for Korean American men compared to one in 40 deaths by suicide for Non-Hispanic White men.[12] Young Asian American women have the second highest suicide rate among women ages 18–24 of different racial and ethnic groups in the US, which may be linked to fractured identities related to disempowerment or difficulties navigating familial and societal expectations.[13]

It has only been within the past fifteen years that the scientific field and researchers like Leong et al. have suggested that culturally specific factors related to suicide must be considered

[9] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "CDC Health Disparities and Inequalities Report—United States, 2013," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)* 62, no. 3 (November 22, 2013): 1, https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/ind2013_su.html#HealthDisparities2013.

[10] Ariel T. Holland and Latha P. Palaniappan, "Problems with the Collection and Interpretation of Asian-American Health Data: Omission, Aggregation, and Extrapolation," *Annals of Epidemiology* 22, no. 6 (June 2012): 397–405, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annepidem.2012.04.001.

[11] Hastings et al., "Leading Causes of Death among Asian American Subgroups," 2.

[12] Hastings et al., "Leading Causes of Death among Asian American Subgroups," 7.

[13] Hyeouk Chris Hahm et al., "Fractured Identity: A Framework for Understanding Young Asian American Women's Self-Harm and Suicidal Behaviors," *Race and Social Problems* 6, no. 1 (March 2014): 56–68, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12552-014-9115-4.

for Asian Americans.[14] The onset of COVID-19 in 2019 unveiled that Asian Americans are the most understudied racial/ethnic group in the peer-reviewed literature, with only a small amount of research on the experiences of Asian Americans.[15] In other words, the evidence shows us the ugly, invisible marks of historical racism toward and the erasure of Asian Americans in US history, even in the field of psychosocial literature.

Furthermore, in 2020, the Mental Health Action Plan of the World Health Organization (WHO) met the goal of reducing the suicide rate worldwide by 10 percent. However, a smaller sample showed that the numbers of suicide during the global pandemic, or since 2019, have risen among people of color.[16] Studies have consistently shown that the media's attention to COVID-19 as the "China virus," a term coined by political leaders, has contributed to Asian Americans experiencing more racial discrimination and assaults, which worsen psychological and physical health, including reducing life satisfaction and self-esteem and increasing depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.[17] Even today, the FBI reports that Asian Americans are one of the ethnic groups seeing the most significant rise in hate crimes, and things are only getting worse with

[14] Leong and Lau, "Providing Effective Mental Health Services," 247.

[15] Stella S. Yi, "Taking Action to Improve Asian American Health," *American Journal of Public Health* 110, no. 4 (April 2020): 435–37, https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305596.

[16] Roni Caryn Rabin, "U.S. Suicides Declined Over All in 2020 but May Have Risen Among People of Color," *New York Times*, September 10, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/15/health/coronavirus-suicide-cdc.html.

[17] Stacey Diane Arañez Litam and Seungbin Oh, "Ethnic Identity and Coping Strategies as Moderators of COVID-19 Racial Discrimination Experiences Among Chinese Americans," *Counseling Outcome Research and Evaluation* 13, no. 2 (2022): 101–15, https://doi.org/10.1080/21501378.2020.1814138; Seungbin Oh and Stacey Diane Arañez Litam, "COVID-19 Racial Discrimination on Mental Health and Life Satisfaction among Asian Americans: Examining a Moderated Mediation Model," *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 13, no. 3 (September 2022): 270–82, https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000267; Justin A. Chen, Emily Zhang, and Cindy H. Liu, "Potential Impact of COVID-19–Related Racial Discrimination on the Health of Asian Americans," *American Journal of Public Health* 110, no. 11 (November 2020): 1624–27, https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305858; Aurora B. Le, "The Health Impacts of COVID-19–Related Racial Discrimination of Asian Americans Extend into the Workplace," *American Journal of Public Health* 111, no. 4 (April 2021): e17–e18, https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.306139; Wei-Ti Chen, Franco R. Lee, and Poy Yamada, "Asian Americans Suffer Within-Community Discrimination Related to COVID-19," *Nursing Outlook* 70, no. 5 (September 2022): 688–90, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.outlook.2022.05.016.

prejudice toward Chinese people being extended to South Asians.[18] Accordingly, Asian Americans, unlike other nonwhite minority groups in America, are not "just in an 'in-between' or peripheral predicament but are pushed to be there and forced to remain there by dominant power structures, which extends to treating Asian Americans as a monolith and the erasure of our experiences and our realities."[19] This treatment is a tragic way of removing Asian American people and their experiences from the consciousness of our society. As a result, Asian Americans are consistently overlooked and do not receive the care or attention they need and deserve in order to create and foster a more inclusive, healthy community.

The potential reasons behind the high suicide mortality numbers for Asian Americans are complex and multifactorial. B. C. Ben Park postulates that rapid economic growth in Korea may have exposed a tension between older, collectivistic Confucian ideals and newer, individualistic and capitalistic values, which has manifested as social and psychological distress, distress that could contribute to suicide, particularly among the elderly.[20] Interestingly, studies suggest that for Koreans and Korean Americans, suicide risk factors outweigh protective factors, such as religious coping, which may contribute to high suicide mortality rates among Korean Americans.[21] This is an important observation, as many studies have long postulated that religion can be a positive protective factor to stop someone from thinking about suicide.[22] Why is this not true for Korean Americans? In addition, "For immigrant groups, in general, suicide rates tend to

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[18] Tran, "Moral Innovation and Ambiguity in Asian American Christianity," *Theology Today* 75, no. 3 (October 1, 2018): 347–57, https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573618791749.

[19] Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 3.

[20] B. C. Ben Park, "Cultural Ambivalence and Suicide Rates in South Korea," in *Suicide and Culture: Understanding the Context*, ed. Erminia Colucci and David Lester (Cambridge, MA: Hogrefe, 2013), 237-262.

[21] A. Kung et al., "Cross-National Comparisons of Increasing Suicidal Mortality Rates for Koreans in the Republic of Korea and Korean Americans in the USA, 2003–2012," *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* 27, no. 1 (February 2018): 62–73, https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796016000792.

[22] Kenneth I. Pargament et al., "Patterns of Positive and Negative Religious Coping with Major Life Stressors," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 4 (1998): 710–24, https://doi.org/10.2307/1388152.

mirror the rates in the country of origin and converge toward the rate in the host country over time," but if this is not happening for Asian Americans, research should examine why.[23]

With this information in mind, I now turn to the psychosocial literature that describes unique factors that may be keeping Asian Americans from seeking and receiving the help they need. Such barriers can be attributed to the "model minority myth," the cultural norm and expectation of "saving face," and theological and cultural assumptions about mental illness and suicide.

The "Model Minority" Myth

Asian Americans are often considered a "model minority," a myth "disseminated by media which holds that economic and educational successes of many Asian immigrants prove that they are not really discriminated against and that America is still a land of opportunity."[24] This myth idealizes Asians and Asian Americans as hard-working, well-educated, and less likely to vocalize complaints as opposed to other racial groups. There are several reasons why these stereotypes are problematic and harmful for Asian Americans. For one, the myth reinforces the message that Asian Americans have little to no mental health concerns or behavioral problems.[25] It does little to draw attention to the "many Asian American immigrant youth who experience severe psychological problems dealing with their deeply alienated predicament."[26]

In addition, the model minority myth ignores statistics like those showing that Asian Americans having the highest poverty rate of all racial/ethnic minority groups in New York

[23] Douglas G. Jacobs et al., *Practice Guideline for the Assessment and Treatment of Patients with Suicidal Behaviors* (N.p.: American Psychiatric Association, 2003), 29.

[24] Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 14.

[25] Sunmin Lee et al., "Model Minority at Risk: Expressed Needs of Mental Health by Asian American Young Adults," *Journal of Community Health* 34, no. 2 (April 2009): 144–52, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10900-008-9137-1.

[26] Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 14.

City.[27] The umbrella of "Asian American" disregards the bimodal income distribution among Asian Americans and does not consider the stark sociopolitical, ethnic, economic, and linguistic disparities between Asian subgroups.[28] The myth thrusts forth the idea that Asian Americans have better socioeconomic circumstances than other racial/ethnic groups, while it "sweeps under the rug a long history of legalized discrimination against Asian Americans," such as forced separations of family members and the barring of Asian families from owning property.[29] Consequently, Asian Americans are silenced and left to themselves to work against the socioeconomic and political powers that dismiss individual contexts and "perpetuate myths of a healthy immigrant advantage."[30]

Moreover, Asian Americans are precariously wedged between being neither black nor white, so with this "presence and absence of all color, whites render Asians, American Indians, and Latinos invisible, ignoring the gradations and complexities of the full spectrum between racial poles."[31] The model minority myth only worsens this situation, making Asian Americans even more invisible. The resulting indifference toward Asian Americans places them in the position of being disposable and expendable.[32] In addition, the false ideas of Asian Americans' success and prosperity promoted by the model minority myth "have hidden truths of Asian Americans' lived experiences, rendering them as socially peripheral and culturally

[27] Office of the Mayor, *New York City Government Poverty Measure 2019* (New York: Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity, 2021), 36, https://www.nyc.gov/site/opportunity/poverty-in-nyc/poverty-measure.page.

[28] Rakesh Kochhar and Anthony Cilluffo, "Income Inequality in the U.S. Is Rising Most Rapidly Among Asians," Pew Research Center, July 12, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/07/12/income-inequality-in-the-u-s-is-rising-most-rapidly-among-asians/.

[29] Jonathan Tran, "Moral Innovation and Ambiguity in Asian American Christianity," *Theology Today* 75, no. 3 (October 1, 2018): 347–57, https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573618791749.

[30] Yi, "Taking Action to Improve Asian American Health," 435-37.

[31] Gary Y. Okihiro and Moon-Ho Jung, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 33, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[32] Lee et al., "Model Minority at Risk," 144-52.

insignificant."[33] The model minority myth, then, serves the racist status quo by minimizing the experiences of Asian Americans and signaling no sense of urgency around them.[34] The dismissal of the experiences of Asian Americans leads to their absence from psychosocial literature and from the consciousness of non-Asian Americans. This may cause harm by reinforcing the myth that there is virtually little to no suicide among Asians and Asian Americans, when the numbers tell us otherwise.

Confucian Worldview

One significant cultural aspect that influences Asian Americans differently than non-Asians is a Confucian worldview that is embedded in our life experiences. This worldview guides us and answers existential questions, like those about the meaning of life and suffering, about the purpose of our lives, and about the human world, with social and ethical relations at the core.[35] The Confucian worldview affects those who identify as East Asians, including Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese. At the heart of Confucian philosophy are ideas regarding social relations and social harmony and a holistic worldview. This ethos that is at least two thousand years of age has shaped how Asians view family, society, religion, and politics.

It was not a coincidence that a significant number of Asian Americans began a movement to walk elderly people safely home from grocery shopping not too long after the Coronavirus was, at least in the media, equated with the term *Chinese virus* in 2020. The aggressive acts toward unsuspecting Asian Americans going about their daily lives, especially young women and the elderly, were disruptive enough for the young to respond by protecting the elderly. An

[33] "New Study of Acute Mental Illness and Christian Faith." 4.
[34] Aurora B. Le, "Health Impacts of COVID-19–Related Racial Discrimination," 17.
[35] Yi-Ying Lin, "Tenets of Life: A Structural Equation Model of East Asian Ideologies, Culturally Informed Characteristics, and Psychological Functioning" (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2017), 16-9, https://urresearch.rochester.edu/institutionalPublicationPublicView.action?institutionalItemId=32623.

act of disrespect, much less hostility, toward an Asian elder is the most extreme form of abusing one's power and identity according to value systems that have Confucian beliefs at their foundation.

Confucianism's emphasis on relationships and social harmony can be evidenced by Asians' respect for "authority, parents, elders as sources of wisdom and priority of the collective over the individual."[36] In particular, Confucianism emphasizes filial piety and other familial values, the practice of which create order and harmony in Asian family systems.[37] For Asian Americans, cultural beliefs that are deeply rooted in familial values can be a strength but also a burden. Asian Americans may experience some limitations as a "consequence of Asian-Confucian patriarchal norms that may still be operative" in their families and communities.[38] For example, while men dominate the public sphere of social life, women carry the responsibilities of creating harmony and order in the family.[39] In Korean culture, wives are called *an-ae*, which literally means "inside person."[40] As the "inside person," wives have been expected to perform household chores, attend to children, and, most importantly, stay indoors, far away from society, while men have been free to be outside the home.[41] These expectations, while not extensive, continue to exist and remain true for many immigrant Asian households today, whether or not the wife holds a paying job outside the home.[42] Asian American women, who have the second highest suicide rate among all racial/ethnic groups in the United States, are vulnerable to being

[36] Tan, "Marriage, Family, and Parenting," 46.

[37] Hee An Choi, *Korean Women and God: Experiencing God in a Multi-Religious Colonial Context* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 1-190.

[38] Hoon Choi, "Gender and Sexuality," in *Asian American Christian Ethics: Voices, Methods, Issues*, ed. Grace Y. Kao and Ilsup Han (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 19-39.

[39] Choi, *Korean Women and God*, 190.

[40] Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *Invisible: Theology and the Experience of Asian American Women* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021), 27

[41] Kim, *Invisible*, 27.

[42] Grace Ji-Sun Kim, "Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Asian American Women," *Feminist Theology* 24, no. 3 (May 1, 2016): 260–74, https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735015627969.

treated as inferior or second-class citizens in society, which increases their risk of depression and suicide.[43] Likewise, experiences of discrimination can negatively affect Asian men, who may feel "inadequate for not living up to the normative expectations of a 'real' man."[44] Asian men deal with stress caused by expectations "to wield the perceived power that many of them do not actually possess," and Asian American men in the US have the added pressure to "suppress all female tendencies and dispositions for fear of being perceived as weak, effeminate, or gay."[45]

Another core social value in Asian cultures that stems from the Confucian worldview is "saving face" to avoid "loss of face." This value represents a desire to avoid humiliation or embarrassment, to maintain dignity, and to preserve the reputation of one's family, since people in Confucian society tend to view their lives as a continuation of their parents' lives. A loss of face in a collectivistic culture that emphasizes solidarity and in-group harmony means stigmatizing oneself and one's family and community. The role of shame and loss of face in the mental health of Asian Americans has often been examined.[46]

Asians and Asian Americans who place an extremely high cultural value on avoidance of shame and on "saving face" experience the challenge of concealing shameful thoughts and feelings and the pressure to present themselves to the outside world as if everything is okay.[47] Consequently, the desire to save face can lead individuals and congregations to normalize not

[43] Julia Y. Ting and Wei-Chin Hwang, "Cultural Influences on Help-Seeking Attitudes in Asian American Students," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 79, no. 1 (January 2009): 125–32, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015394.

[44] Choi, "Gender and Sexuality," 19-20.

[45] Choi, "Gender and Sexuality," 29.

[46] Frederick T. L. Leong et al., "A Psychometric Evaluation of the Loss of Face Scale," *Psychological Assessment* 30, no. 3 (2018): 396–409, https://doi.org/10.1037/pas0000492.

[47] Augsberger et al., "Culturally Related Risk Factors of Suicidal Ideation, Intent, and Behavior among Asian American Women," *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 9, no. 4 (December 2018): 252–61.

speaking openly to people about specific topics, among them homosexuality, mental illness, and suicide, whether those people are inside or outside the family, congregation, or community.[48]

Two central teachings of Confucianism are *ren* (humaneness, benevolence) and *yi* (right behavior, propriety), which have been understood through interpersonal commitments, such as the loyalty expressed in filial piety. Dying of suicide for the sake of ren and yi have been deemed socially and culturally acceptable; some who have done so have even been honored and praised.[49] However, suicide as a result of one's troubles or failures or as a "solution to chronic depression" is considered wrong because it disregards another important value of Confucianism, *xiao*, or filial piety.[50] As such, the sharing of negative feelings or shameful feelings can be devalued because such expressions can potentially be a "disgrace to family honor and disruptive against collective harmony."[51]

Confucian and Christian values play out uniquely in the lives of Asian Americans. Internalized expectations of parental wishes and the familial pressure to attain the "picture-perfect demeanor" can lead to lower mood and other psychological problems.[52] Because there are always goals to achieve for many East Asians, those who seek mental-health services can consider themselves to be flawed and may desire not to be seen.[53] Thus, it is not hard to find people from shame- and honor-based cultures actively hiding from others "personal information

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[48] Kuei-Hsiang Han, "The Feeling of 'Face' in Confucian Society: From a Perspective of Psychosocial Equilibrium," *Frontiers in Psychology* 7, no. 1055 (July 19, 2016): 1–9. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01055.

[49] Lo Ping-cheung, "Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide from Confucian Moral Perspectives," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (March 2010): 53–77, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-009-9147-4.

[50] Ping-cheung, "Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide," 56.

[51] Bryan S. K. Kim, Donald R. Atkinson, and Peggy H. Yang, "The Asian Values Scale: Development, Factor Analysis, Validation, and Reliability," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 46, no. 3 (1999): 342–52, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.46.3.342.

[52] Augsberger et al., "Culturally Related Risk Factors," 257.

[53] David Lester, "The Role of Shame in Suicide," *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 352–61.

they perceive as distressing or negative."[54] An awful example of how these values are ingrained and understood can be found in the number of men who chose to conceal and estrange themselves from family, living on the streets or dying of suicide, rather than sacrificing their "manliness" during the economic crisis in South Korea.[55] The impact of values transmitted in Asian families can also be found in Asian Americans. Many Asian Americans, both first- and second-generation, continue to show reluctance to access mental-health services and are less likely to perceive a need for help or to seek a mental health professional when risks are high.[56]

Factors that influence whether or not Asian Americans seek help for mental health issues include fear of public stigma, language barriers, physical barriers, and generational status.[57] Asians come from cultural contexts where people associate mental disorders with negative feelings and emotional difficulties.[58] Within this framework, there is a distinction between psychological and physical ailments: psychological illnesses are shameful, while physical ones are not. This is another reason many Asian Americans seek help from non-mental health medical professionals for psychological problems.[59]

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[54] Bryan S. K. Kim, Donald R. Atkinson, and Dawn Umemoto, "Asian Cultural Values and the Counseling Process: Current Knowledge and Directions for Future Research," *The Counseling Psychologist* 29, no. 4 (July 1, 2001): 570–603, https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000001294006; Adam Friedlander et al., "Self-Concealment and Suicidal Behaviors," *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 42, no. 3 (June 2012): 332–340, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1943-278X.2012.00094.x.

[55] Choi, "Gender and Sexuality," 28.

[56] Joyce P. Chu, Kun-Yueh Hsieh, and Di Ann Tokars, "Help-Seeking Tendencies in Asian Americans with Suicidal Ideation and Attempts," *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 2, no. 1 (2011): 25–38, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023326.

[57] William Feigelman, Bernard S. Gorman, and John R. Jordan, "Stigmatization and Suicide Bereavement," *Death Studies* 33, no. 7 (August 2009): 591-608, https://doi.org/10.1080/07481180902979973.

[58] Evelyn Lee, "Cultural Factors in Working with Southeast Asian Refugee Adolescents," *Journal of Adolescence* 11, no. 2 (June 1, 1988): 167–79, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-1971(88)80051-4.

[59] Leong and Lau, "Providing Effective Mental Health Services," 201-14.

It has been well documented that, in a collectivistic culture deeply rooted in Confucian values, these values contribute to a more profound stigma being placed on mental illness.[60] Indeed, it is quite common for Asian Americans not to speak to people outside of the family about mental health problems.[61] For example, though most Koreans have accepted the hereditary nature of mental disorders, this population nevertheless perceives such a disorder as a shameful inherited trait in a family.[62] We can glean from studies that stigma continues to be a major player and is culturally reinforced in Asian American communities. Asian Americans report that their communities continue to stigmatize people with mental illnesses and place feelings of shame on them, and the stigma and shame experienced by Asian people are major reasons why people are unwilling to seek help—they fear being ostracized by their community.[63] Openly speaking about mental illness and emotional and psychological distress is often considered taboo.

Even with the absence of literature on Asian Americans' mental health, it is logical that the shame and stigma connected to Asian cultures' and communities' negative understandings of suicide and mental illness play a role in hindering individuals and communities from seeking help. The stigma around mental illness seems to be a factor that uniquely and profoundly touches Asian Americans. The studies I have referenced show that harmful attitudes and views toward mental illness and suicide impede Asian Americans from being forthcoming about their psychological and emotional struggles. In other words, the stigma that is directly and unequivocally attached to mental illness plays a huge role in shaping values around the use of

[60] Meekyung Han et al., "Mental-Illness Stigma among Korean Immigrants: Role of Culture and Destigmatization Strategies," *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 8, no. 2 (June 2017): 134–41, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/aap0000074.

[61] Augsberger et al., "Underutilization of Mental Health Services," 1-11.

[62] Lee et al., "Improving Access to Mental Health Services for Korean American Immigrants: Moving Toward a Community Partnership Between Religious and Mental Health Services," *Psychiatry Investigation* 5, no. 1 (March 2008): 14–20, https://doi.org/10.4306/pi.2008.5.1.14.

[63] Wynaden et al., "Asian Communities' Access to Mental Health Care," 88-95.

mental health services, in seeking help, in recognizing the need for help, and in feeling the need to conceal concerns from others.

We can safely conclude that the low number of Asian Americans utilizing mental health services does not reflect fewer mental health concerns. Nor does the lower number mean a decreased need for mental health services. However, it does point to the shortcoming of current assessments that do not accurately capture the entire picture, which might explain why the numbers are lower for Asian Americans.

Asian American Churches

There is little research that investigates the role of ethnic churches in providing spiritual, social, and psychological support for Asian Americans experiencing distress or depressive symptoms.[64] Nor does the literature help us understand how Asian American Christians understand mental illness and suicide. Psychosocial literature has alluded to how Asian Americans do indeed have unique experiences, cultural expectations, and sociocultural backgrounds that impact Asian Americans' lives differently. However, there is no research on Asian Americans' experiences of suicide or the attitudes or beliefs of Asian American clergy about suicide. Interestingly, many professionals and academics have recommended that more efforts must be made to destigmatize the utilization of mental health services and to work directly with the Asian American population and their faith communities.[65] While current psychosocial literature reveals a dire need to address the silent, high number of suicides within the Asian American population, no one has connected cultural and psychosocial materials with meaning-making about and theological understandings of suicide that are nuanced for Asian American Christians.

[64] Park et al., "Religious Orientation and Depressive Symptoms," 315-24.
[65] Augsberger et al., "Underutilization of Mental Health Services," 2.

I speculate that Asian Americans are experiencing similar barriers as those discussed previously when it comes to addressing concerns about mental health and suicide within their spiritual and religious homes. For us Asian Americans, the cultural norms embedded within our identity are also embedded in our religious communities. I suspect that saving face, shame, and stigma ring even more true for Asian American Christians than non-Christian Asian Americans. I am assuming that for many Asian Americans who participate in churches, Confucian values such as the desire to keep family affairs within the boundaries of the family also play out in faith contexts. Moreover, I assert that many Asian American Christians hold a conservative theology that was first introduced by Western missionaries to Asian countries and that offered a "superior way"—the American Dream—that may not be very helpful when mixed with cultural pressures to hide potentially shameful things. Sociologist Sharon Kim notes that the ideal of the American Dream in Protestant church cultures also reinforces the idea that all truly spiritual individuals or "good Christians" will work hard and succeed at what they do—an assumption tied to the older belief among those anxious about their predestined status that success in one's worldly vocation was to be taken as a sign of being among the elect.[66] Furthermore, Asian American immigrant churches confuse the American Dream with the will of God and adopt the prosperity gospel, an assumption that they are living in the will of God and that more blessings are coming their way.[67] In short, the operational values and theologies in Asian American faith contexts may not be beneficial or culturally relevant to the healing work of addressing suicide among Asian Americans.

[66] Sharon Kim, *A Faith of Our Own: Second-Generation Spirituality in Korean American Churches* (Ithaca, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 28. https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813549477.

[67] Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 60. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Since the first Asian immigrants arrived from overseas, many churches and temples have been established as a way to provide a social, cultural, and educational center in the United States. For Koreans in particular, studies have shown that Korean ethnic churches provide a second home away from home; these churches serve as spiritual and social centers for many immigrants, regardless of their theological background.[68] For immigrants like Koreans, Korean churches have been a central place where the people's social and cultural needs are met; clergy in these churches often assume roles beyond those of a spiritual leader.[69]

Naturally, churches and communities play a role in creating a culture where words like *mental illness* and *suicide* are normalized or nuanced in a way that communicates care, without dismissing and minimizing cultural values. But the pressures of the model minority myth, the Confucian values of harmony, the stigma around mental health, the value of saving face, and the practice of concealment that are part of Asian American cultures are also found in church communities. Thus, Korean and other Asian churches have become extensions of Confucian families, maintaining and reinforcing Confucian values: "Because of the hierarchical and patriarchal church structure, many denominations in Asia still do not ordain women."[70] Confucian worldviews and values manifest not only in denominations in Asia but also in the United States. Hierarchal leadership roles, such as deacon and elder, are only held by men in many Asian American churches. In other words, "In Korean immigrant churches, men hold the offices and make the official decisions, while women stay in the kitchen preparing meals.

[68] Park et al., "Religious Orientation and Depressive Symptoms," 315-24.
[69] Lee et al., "Access to Mental Health Services," 14-20.
[70] Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 30. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Women are sometimes elected to hold offices but they have a difficult time exercising their gifts of leadership."[71]

Even in acculturated English-speaking Korean American congregations, patriarchal sexism prevails, where men usually hold the highest leadership positions in the system. Meanwhile, the "second-generation women are usually highly educated and keenly aware when they find themselves playing only subordinate roles in the church leadership."[72] Assessing this situation, Andrew Sung Park notes that, despite some gains in the status of women in Korea and other parts of the world, tentacles of the "age-old ideology of patriarchy and the consequent subordination and exploitation of women are still strongly present in Korea as well as in the Korean immigrant community."[73]

Interestingly, studies have shown that many Asian Americans seek care from religious leaders and family members when given a choice about how to receive counseling.[74] This finding is consistent with other studies that show that many Asian Americans prefer to seek help within their cultural networks rather than accessing care from healthcare professionals.[75] Studies suggest that important predictors of attitudes about clergy as a mental health resource are the extent to which a community holds clergy members in high esteem and how much a community values distinctively religious perspectives on mental illness and its resolution.[76] If clergy are held in high esteem and religious perspectives are highly valued, then pastoral caregivers can shed light that dispels the unfounded stigma attached to suicide and liberates those gravely affected by

[71] Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 26.
[72] Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 28.
[73] Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 107.
[74] Alice W. Cheng et al., "Model Minority Stereotype: Influence on Perceived Mental Health Needs of Asian Americans," *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 19, no. 3 (2017): 572–81, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-016-0440-0.
[75] Wynaden et al., "Asian Communities' Access to Mental Health Care," 88-95.
[76] Ellison et al., "Clergy as a Source of Mental Health Assistance," 190-211.

it. However, studies affirm that clergy often cannot fulfill such a role.[77] Additionally, a 1984 study with clergy revealed that many were insufficiently trained in recognizing the presence of psychopathology.[78] A more recent study in 2014 that surveyed one thousand US Protestant pastors revealed that only 38 percent of pastors strongly agreed that they were fully equipped to identify an acute mental illness.[79] Even if faith leaders can recognize suicide warning signs, inquire about suicidality, and make referrals, suicide survivors give them lower ratings for helpfulness than others.[80]

Perhaps Asian Americans are more likely to seek help from clergy (who might seem an appropriate resource) than from mental health professionals. But as has been noted, many Asian Americans are, in fact, not receiving a response from those clergy that enable them to heal as individuals, family units, or members of faith congregations.[81] An Asian American woman in one study noted that she wanted to talk with Asian people at her church about her depression, but she did not want to "bother" them, nor did she feel they would understand.[82] The notion that this woman thought church people couldn't understand her points to how mental illness is treated like a taboo subject in Asian American faith communities. It also says to me that many Asian Americans are unable to trust their faith communities as a genuine healing source. It is also concerning that many Asian pastors endorse the spiritual belief that "depression is absent from people who are deeply Christian."[83]

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[77] LifeWay Research, "Acute Mental Illness and Christian Faith," 13.

[78] Wayne E. Wylie, "Health Counseling Competencies Needed by the Minister," *Journal of Religion and Health* 23, no. 3 (September 1, 1984): 237–49, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00990789.

[79] Lifeway Research, "Acute Mental Illness and Christian Faith," 17.

[80] Chu, Hsieh, and Tokars, "Help-Seeking Tendencies in Asian Americans," 25-38.

[81] Park et al., "Religious Orientation and Depressive Symptoms," 315-24.

[82] Augsberger et al., "Underutilization of Mental Health Services," 7.

[83] Ann-Marie Yamada et al., "Beliefs about Etiology and Treatment of Mental Illness among Korean Presbyterian Pastors," *Journal of Religion and Health* 58, no. 3 (June 2019): 870–80, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-018-0720-1.

Importantly, stigma and shame about mental illness have been common experiences among Korean clergy. In a study by Mikyong Kim-Goh, more than half of the Korean clergy participants conceptualized psychotic symptoms of religious delusions as primarily a religious rather than a psychiatric problem.[84] I speculate that many Asian families and Asian Americans (including their pastors) equate mental illness with weak faith, and this belief can have very harmful effects.

In sum, the theological implications for Asian American clergy are significant. For one, Asian clergy take on more than just the title of a pastor or a religious leader when they begin leading a congregation. They assume great power within the church's makeup with its embedded cultural values. They become gatekeepers, taking on the role of a spiritual leader whom many would look up to as someone who has knowledge about affliction and suffering and, therefore, can be approached for counsel. However, dynamics such as shame, concealment, Confucianism, and model minority pressures within Asian communities make it less likely that religious leaders will openly share information on suicide or mental health and vice versa, that church members will initiate conversations with their pastors about mental illness.

A concern that I have presented in this literature review is that Asian American church and clergy practices uphold embedded cultural and theological assumptions and attitudes regarding suicide that are unhelpful and yet play a vital role in their care for Asian Americans experiencing mental distress. This literature review shows that variables such as the model minority myth, Confucian values, and the theologies of the first Asian Christians, which are embedded in current Asian American theology, play an integral role in how suicide and mental

[84] Mikyong Kim-Goh, "Conceptualization of Mental Illness among Korean-American Clergymen and Implications for Mental Health Service Delivery," *Community Mental Health Journal* 29, no. 5 (October 1993): 405–412, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00754408.

illness are treated in Asian American Christian communities. Overall, the operational values and theologies in Asian communities of faith have received little attention. Asian Americans have distinct barriers that arise from cultural expectations and conservative theologies around suicide held by both congregants and Asian American pastors. Healing and culturally nuanced pastoral and spiritual care will not be possible without understanding the lived experiences of barriers that Asian American Christians face and the undergirding assumptions and cultural expectations embedded in the lives of Asian Americans regarding the topic of suicide. More poignantly noted, without examining the operating theologies manifesting in Asian faith contexts, a more culturally relevant and nuanced theology will not be forthcoming.

Pastoral Theology on Suicide

I now turn to the field of pastoral theology for ways suicide can be addressed. First, it must be noted that the historical and traditional influence of church patriarchs from Europe was extended to Asia through the movement of Western missionaries. We Asians and Pacific Islanders were told to "denounce the world in order to accept the Gospel, but the world we were denying was our own world, our own cultures. . . . When we accepted the Gospel we also accepted the trappings. And since the trappings were Western, the Gospel also became Western."[85] Thus, Asians took on Augustine's stance toward suicide, viewing it as a mortal sin.

Many churches' views on suicide have changed to a more understanding stance. For example, The United Methodist Church's Social Principles, which are the denomination's prayerful reflections and official views on social issues, include a statement that "suicide is not the way a human life should end."[86] The United Methodist Church stands against the unjust

[85] Daniel C. Arichea Jr. "Look East but Go West!," *Journal of Asian and Asian American Theology* 8 (2007–2008): 8.

[86] *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶161, ProQuest Ebook Central.

stigma attached to surviving family and friends and teaches that the church is responsible for providing access to pastoral care and education that "address the biblical, theological, social, and ethical issues related to death and dying, including suicide."[87] However, it seems as though the driving forces that create barriers to change are the roles of social, cultural, and religious stigmas attached to suicide. Talking about suicide will never be easy. (Maybe it shouldn't be.)

In the field of pastoral theology, Loren Townsend's work *Suicide: Pastoral Responses* comes to mind. His work on how pastors can best respond to suicide is an attempt to break the tragic silence often found in churches. The book assumes pastors are often first responders to a crisis such as suicide.[88] He lays out three primary goals: to provide a resource that is a framework for understanding suicide, to set strategies for how a congregation can respond, and to advocate a liberative praxis that is theologically helpful for those affected by suicide. I appreciate that Townsend begins by noting that suicide is personal, theological, and congregational. He then explains how suicide and religion have historically been "inescapably joined."[89] He understands that, too often, those at risk of suicide cannot seek help because of the ingrained taboo around suicide or fear of judgment.[90] The narratives that have survived throughout history for Christians include this harmful taboo around suicide, such as the idea that "self-destructive thoughts" are a sign of spiritual failure or the theological view that suicide is "the unpardonable sin."[91] Just as the history of religion and culture have played a part in our current understandings of the connection between suicide and sin, pastoral caregivers and

[87] *Book of Discipline*, ¶161.
[88] Townsend, *Suicide*, 10.
[89] Townsend, *Suicide*, 12.
[90] Townsend, *Suicide*, 10.
[91] Townsend, *Suicide*, 17.

congregations have the opportunity to change these understandings by changing the way we respond to those at risk of suicide and to those who are survivors of suicide loss.

Townsend focuses on women, who are usually more vulnerable to suicide, by helping readers understand how women, from an early age, are socialized into a dominant culture that silences and oppresses them. They often feel driven to conform to the patriarchal expectations of society. This is important to consider, as patriarchy and beliefs and values that favor patriarchy exist in East Asian cultures and the practices of Asian communities. Townsend emphasizes that care should begin with sensitivity to how an attempted suicide survivor's story intersects or fails to intersect with the dominant cultural and religious narratives.[92] The pastoral responses that the pastor and congregation make can show how religious coping and liberative narratives can be utilized to empower the community as a whole. However, I find the pastoral responses that Townsend advocates to be somewhat limited in application to ethnic groups such as Asians and Asian Americans.

As one resource, Townsend refers to womanist theologian Elaine Brown Crawford's work on African American women's narratives of hope, a theological construct passed through women generationally. While African American women create a sisterhood that is theologically grounded, empowering, and lasts for generations, there are no studies to date that have discovered a similar phenomenon among Asian women. Suicidology is now beginning to pay attention to the connections between patriarchy and high levels of female self-destructive mental illness and attempted suicide.[93] No studies indicate that Asian women seek out other women or practices in collective settings that attend to the unhelpful narratives impacting them. Instead, recent studies have noted that Asian Americans are reluctant to disclose their struggles out of a

[92] Townsend, *Suicide*, 60.
[93] Townsend, *Suicide*, 76.

desire not to burden others or the communities they are connected to.[94] Sharing about personal distress, such as thoughts of suicide, may be considered something that would significantly impact a family or a community in negative ways. Hae-Seong Park et al.'s study of those who identify the church as an integral part of their lives suggests that mental health professionals should consider the role of religion in the lives of Asian American clients, particularly their level of involvement in church life.[95]

Secondly, Townsend does not address or consider the cultural, socioeconomic, political, and religious factors that closely impact and become sources of barriers that interfere with pastoral responses to suicide in Asian American faith communities, factors that differ from those of non-Asian groups. Absent from his book is a discussion of cultural factors that affect norms of care. This lack indicates a dismissal of how a cultural element such as shame or stigma impacts "Americans" differently. It mutes the importance of cultural factors such as filial piety, saving face, shame, and concealment, which cannot be taken out of context when considering pastoral care. Acculturated Asian American churches still exhibit patriarchal gendered-role patterns and expectations that are carefully curated and encouraged in Christian circles. The cultural values that surface in Asian Americans communities and churches cannot be minimized or treated as invisible or absent.

This brings up an important point: Townsend treats ministers as practitioners and caregivers who can be trained to identify at-risk individuals. I agree that clergy are uniquely positioned to respond to suicide in an appropriate and theologically sound manner, becoming advocates for suicide prevention and leading the way in how to respond to suicide and the

[94] Augsberger et al., "Underutilization of Mental Health Services," 5.
[95] Park et al., "Religious Orientation and Depressive Symptoms," 315-24.

suicide-bereaved.[96] However, more recent literature shows that clergy are less likely to inquire about parishioners' mental health when it comes to more challenging situations of concern.[97] Furthermore, in a study that surveyed clergy's understanding of the etiology of mental health illness, Asian clergypersons were more likely than Euro-American clergypersons to state that bad parenting and demon possession were important in causing mental illness.[98] Consistently, another study that looked at Asian American immigrant clergy referrals indicated that even Korean clergy with graduate degrees were less likely to make referrals than Euro-American clergy.[99] Not surprisingly, contemporary pastoral responses to suicide are still accompanied by a level of stigma.[100] One Salvation Army minister has noted that he has lost count of the number of times he has officiated over a funeral because the pastor or leader of the suicide victim refused to do so.[101] My guess is that the sentiments and attitudes about suicide shared by Asian American Christians rob them of the ability to voice their struggles and to access spiritual care. They also feed the practice of concealing shame and hardships in churches, making this practice a norm. The findings of studies like these validate my suspicion that, despite denominational and clergy beliefs that churches should provide resources to and support individuals with mental illness and that pastors are in positions to be trained to respond to suicide in parish settings, many pastors lack time and training to address mental health and suicide prevention within their churches.[102]

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[96] Karen Mason et al., "Predictors of Clergy's Ability to Fulfill a Suicide Prevention Gatekeeper Role," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 70, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 34–39, https://doi.org/10.1177/1542305016631487.

[97] Hedman, "Minnesota Clergy's Attitudes on Suicide Prevention," 565-73.

[98] Yamada et al., "Beliefs about Etiology and Treatment of Mental Illness," 870-80.

[99] Ann-Marie Yamada, Karen Kyeunghae Lee, and Min Ah Kim, "Community Mental Health Allies: Referral Behavior Among Asian American Immigrant Christian Clergy," *Community Mental Health Journal* 48, no. 1 (February 2012): 107–13, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-011-9386-9.

[100] Astrid Staley, "The Phenomenon of Disenfranchised Grief Experienced by Those Bereaved by Suicide: A Contemporary Pastoral Response." *Journal of Contemporary Ministry*, no. 2 (May 18, 2016): 22–38.

[101] Staley, "Phenomenon of Disenfranchised Grief," 1-38.

[102] Hedman, "Minnesota Clergy's Attitudes on Suicide Prevention and Likelihood to Inquire about Suicidal Thoughts and Intent," 565-73.

Salient cultural factors can inadvertently misinform the practices of clergy handling suicide. For instance, Asian Americans are known to be "hidden ideators," meaning they are less likely to disclose their thoughts of suicide to others.[103] Hidden Suicide Ideation/Intent (HSI) is the concealment of suicidal distress from others, a cultural phenomenon found among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. One study has found that Asian American HSI was positively linked with cultural suicide risk factors.[104] Striking in this study is that, contrary to the idea that "HSI is a culturally preferred method of coping or suppressing suicide, positive HSI status is related to a more severe cultural suicide risk as reflected by greater minority stress, higher family and social discord, more cultural idioms of suicidal distress, or lower cultural acceptability of suicide."[105] We can infer from this study that with high HSI among Asian Americans, pastors will need to keep in mind that Asian Americans experiencing psychological distress will likely deny or hide their suicidal thoughts and feelings, making it challenging to identify such persons and their needs in Asian American churches where cultural norms of concealing shame and expectations of maintaining harmony are played out. Instead, clinicians need to assess Asian American clients' decisions or hesitancies to disclose suicidal ideation or intent.[106]

For all of the reasons given above, Townsend's book may be culturally limited in its ability to provide a practice of care for Asian Americans. This is a striking reminder that, unlike other Americans, Asian Americans' religious coping resources have not been enough to offset the barriers that keep Asian Americans from sharing their mental health struggles.

[103] Chu, Hsieh, and Tokars, "Help-Seeking Tendencies in Asian Americans," 25-38

[104] Chu et al., "Hidden Suicidal Ideation or Intent among Asian American Pacific Islanders: A Cultural Phenomenon Associated with Greater Suicide Severity," *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 9, no. 4 (December 2018): 262–69, https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000134.

[105] Chu et al., "Hidden Suicidal Ideation or Intent," 266.

[106] Chu et al., "Hidden Suicidal Ideation or Intent," 267.

A more concise resource for suicide prevention is Duane R. Bidwell's essay "Wanting to Die: How to Prevent Suicide," which lays out how churches can readily implement suicide prevention practices for youth, young adults, and suicidal adults in their congregations. Bidwell provides practical, easy-to-follow guidelines for identifying warning signs and engaging in prevention and intervention, along with case vignettes and helpful Bible verses that may apply to Asian American congregations.[107] Bidwell highlights an important aspect not included in Townsend's resource: children and adolescents are the most susceptible to suicide, so it is important to zero in on and provide information to this population. Bidwell provides easy-to-follow bullet points for identifying and assessing the risk of suicide that can be applied not only to adults, like in Townsend's book, but also to younger people. Although Bidwell's essay was not written specifically for the Asian population, his practical five steps for responding to a suicidal youth in terms of prevention, intervention, and postvention can be readily to Asian American adolescents.

Bidwell captures a larger population, including Asian Americans, by adding what we know about adolescents' racial/ethnic and gender differences. He brings to light findings from studies showing that teens from cultural backgrounds that hold suicide in a negative or blaming light tend to forgo help, which seems to confirm studies on Asian American cultures.[108] He lays out the general risk factors for adolescent suicide and is careful to nuance how these factors interplay in different contexts. Since studies have shown that Asian Americans are at high risk of being "hidden ideators," caregivers can be cognizant of what cultural variables play a critical role in this demographic. Understanding that Asian cultures and Christians may have ingrained

[107] Bidwell, "Wanting to Die," 220.
[108] Bidwell, "Wanting to Die," 220.

taboos or stigmas regarding suicide and mental illness, an adult caregiver may approach an Asian American adolescent differently.

The knowledge that one's cultural background can play an integral role in one's mental health can be applied to Asian American cultures, which are also actively at work in Asian American churches. As shame is closely tied to Asian cultures' expectations regarding health and wellness, the stigma attached to things like mental illness and suicide can become a barrier to providing resources for many Asian Americans. An effort will need to be made to address the stigma and shame that adds to hidden suicide ideation or a tendency to ignore the need for help in the presence of suicide. According to one study, compared to the white population, Asian Americans with suicide attempts were less likely to seek help and to perceive a need for help.[109] The researchers for this study speculated about the reason for these disparities, stating that perhaps Asian Americans with suicide ideation underestimate the "importance of their condition and do not receive the level of support they need."[110] The study ended by raising questions about whether Asian Americans may have different methods for coping with suicide ideation. Even so, overall, Asian Americans in their homes, schools, and churches are not receiving the help they could use.

I appreciate that Bidwell takes into account that context matters. What may be true for one population may not apply to another. It would be a disservice to generalize our current understanding of suicide without considering how faith, cultural expectations, and beliefs play a role in the lives of many Asian American Christians in different contexts.

In Bidwell's essay, he provides a vignette of what appears to be a scary situation, a religious leader in charge who has never experienced responding to an adolescent who is

[109] Chu, Hsieh, and Tokars, "Help-Seeking Tendencies in Asian Americans," 31.
[110] Chu, Hsieh, and Tokars, "Help-Seeking Tendencies in Asian Americans," 34.

suicidal.[111] This situation is dealt with in a way that readers can vicariously learn to use in their settings. The five tasks he suggests—Ask, Listen, Assess, Keep Safe, and Connect to Resources—can be instantly implemented with youth.[112] These are evidence-based practices and steps that a pastor can use to respond appropriately to a young person who may be suicidal. I also appreciated that the case study showed how adults could respond, instead of illustrating how "not to" respond in a similar context. For example, the case study noted that the youth "was surprised that her parents received the news (she is suicidal) calmly."[113] This is an invitation for readers to speculate that this surprising behavior from the youth's perspective had to do with how the religious leader held critical components together. One learns that responding calmly to a suicidal adolescent who has just disclosed her thoughts and feelings is a helpful and positive way to respond in this context.

As pastoral theologians, both Townsend and Bidwell treat the church community and congregation as the epicenter for where pastoral care and responses to suicide occur. The faith community is well-suited to being in a position to respond to suicide with radical compassion and grace. The congregation can become the living embodiment of God's love. However, the tragedy of suicide hits home again and again. Might there be more helpful theological stances for breaking through the barriers actively getting in the way of healing and even thriving in our faith communities? The entire collective realm is affected when a person dies by suicide. The theology that arises from the ashes will need to be a relational theology that considers how we are interconnected and provides a theological framework that prevents injustices from being

[111] Bidwell, "Wanting to Die," 222-25.
[112] Bidwell, "Wanting to Die," 222-24
[113] Bidwell, "Wanting to Die," 225.

perpetrated on those afflicted with thoughts of suicide and those silently mourning as suicide loss survivors on their own, invisible to others.

Initially, I stated that the current theology that is dominant in Asian American churches is not beneficial or life-giving to those affected by suicide. Many studies have noted the importance of faith leaders being able to identify risks and assess them to make proper referrals. However, in our families and churches, neither care seekers nor spiritual caregivers are seeking or finding alternative or life-giving ways to address suicide in ways that specifically meet the needs of Asian American Christians.

Process Theology in an Asian American Context

Questions. When suicide takes a life, questions flood those left behind: "What more could I have done?" "If only …" "Why?" Aside from guilt, grief, and shock, suicide also raises questions like, "Is my loved one in hell? Is she saved? Why didn't God stop her?" While answers to these questions may be apparent to some, studies find that most Christians are confused because they differ in their views of suicide, "resulting in highly nuanced and complex theologies of suicide."[114] For Asian American Christians, no known studies highlight how they understand suicide nor what kinds of questions they may have. We do know that some or many Asian American Christians struggle on their own to understand God's will in suicide, especially when pastors are quiet.

As I noted earlier, suicide does not always yield more open dialogue or room to address the silence on the topic. In fact, studies show that suicide loss survivors do not have the ability "to be able to talk openly of their loss, and in many cases, even to admit to it," making it a greater challenge for those impacted by suicide to receive the care they need.[115] Judgmental

[114] Karen Mason, "Developing a Theology of Suicide," *Africanus Journal* 7 (2015): 5–14.
[115] Carr and Carr, *Fierce Goodbye*, 123.

words born out of theologies that condemn suicide have seeped into faith communities and influenced the ways they understand and make sense of suicide. This leads one to believe that there is a general hierarchal understanding of forms of dying. Even without ill intent, the absence of compassion regarding suicide and barely murmuring the word *suicide* in our culture and faith communities implicitly send messages that there are acceptable versus frowned-upon ways of dying. For example, deaths due to accidents, illnesses, and natural causes seem more honorable and culturally and religiously acceptable ways to die. Even the terms *natural death* or *natural-death survivors*, which may sound neutral and entirely innocent, in retrospect, categorize deaths by suicide as "unnatural" and the survivors as "abnormal." Suicide can then be silently or covertly judged and questioned. Being compelled to deal with a highly sensitive topic like suicide when one rarely hears anything about how to address suicide in families or churches shuts down our individual and collective capacity to respond in constructive and accessible ways.

In this section, I will provide literature on how many Christians in general understand suicide. Understanding what Christians believe about suicide can shed light on what theologies might be operating in churches. I will also note how using process theology is relevant to the values of Confucianism, which cannot be separated from Asian American identity, and how it can serve as a useful tool in dismantling the silence around suicide.

Augustine's fourth-century work *City of God* identified suicide as murdering oneself, which is a grievous degradation of life. Today, many Judeo-Christian theologians continue to hold this belief.[116] Specifically, Potter examined Christian theologies and their teachings on suicide with the intent to provide multiple Christian viewpoints and interpretations. Most of the major traditions of Christianity assert that suicide is wrong based on the messages expressed in

[116] Mason, "Developing a Theology of Suicide," 5-14.

Scripture. There are several core beliefs related to why Christians reject suicide. First, Christians hold that people are made in the image of God and formed in the likeness of the divine. To die of suicide disregards the image of God that is set apart from the rest of creation and demands preservation.[117] Second, Christians reject suicide because God is the owner and giver of life (Jeremiah 10:23), adding that, despite trials and suffering, Job refused to take his own life. Thus, many Christians cite "sanctity of life" as a reason for believing suicide is a sin.[118]

Another core reason suicide is considered a sin is because it is perceived as a violation of the sixth of the Ten Commandments, which states, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). In addition, "the Bible's silence does not imply approval."[119] Moreover, Christianity does not condone suicide because, ultimately, suicide is seen as harming the entire community and not just the individual.[120] In Christianity,

> Intentionally causing one's death, or suicide, is ... equally as wrong as murder; such an action on the part of a person is to be considered as a rejection of God's sovereignty and loving plan. Furthermore, mainline Protestant Christians would believe that suicide is also often a refusal of love for self, the denial of the instinct to live, a flight from the duties of justice and charity owed to one's neighbor, various communities, or the whole of society.[121]

Conversely, a reason why some Christians believe that suicide is not a sin is because either "they were a victim of insanity or demonic possession."[122] These Christians cite diminished responsibility as a reason for refraining from condemnation—stating that the person who kills himself "is a victim of insanity or demonic possession, unable to make rational

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[117] Potter, "Is Suicide the Unforgivable Sin?," 1-19.
[118] Mason, "Developing a Theology of Suicide," 8.
[119] Mason, "Developing a Theology of Suicide," 6.
[120] Potter, "Is Suicide the Unforgivable Sin?," 6.
[121] Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration on Euthanasia," May 5, 1980, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19800505_euthanasia_en.html.
[122] Mason, "Developing a Theology of Suicide," 6.

decisions."[123] Others, like Carr and Carr, hold that suicide is not a sin because, while the Bible mentions suicide seven times, no single case condemns suicide.[124]

Interestingly, among the dominant Christian denominations, like the Catholics, Baptists, and Protestants, the highest suicide rates are found among those endorsing a Protestant faith and the lowest rates are found among Catholics and evangelical Baptists.[125] Studies suggest that moral and religious objections to suicide have a unique association with suicidal behavior. More directly put, life-saving beliefs associated with religious commitment may serve to protect against suicide.[126] It is generally accepted that religion can serve as a protective factor against suicide across denominations.

However, there are "aspects of religion that are now recognized as potentially representing a risk factor for increased suicide risk for some followers."[127] I would further accentuate that it is worthwhile to examine which religious doctrines serve as protective factors and can be part of a life-giving theology. Often, telling people that suicide condemns them to hell does not keep them from suicide because the hell they are experiencing inside may be worse than any feared eternal hell.[128] Moreover, a community's understanding of suicide as a sin can draw people to perceive suicide death as an individual incident, discouraging active participation towards communal healing. Religious attitudes toward suicide that consider it a sin and immoral, which can be shame-producing, can contribute to more silence among Asian Americans. To put

[123] Mason, "Developing a Theology of Suicide," 6.
[124] Carr and Carr, *Fierce Goodbye*, 63.
[125] Radoslaw Panczak et al., "Religion and Suicide in Patients with Mental Illness or Cancer," *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 43, no. 2 (April 2013): 213–22, https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12009.
[126] Kanita Dervic et al., "Moral or Religious Objections to Suicide May Protect against Suicidal Behavior in Bipolar Disorder," *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* 72, no. 10 (2011): 1390–96, https://doi.org/10.4088/JCP.09m05910gre.
[127] Robin Edward Gearing and Dana Alonzo, "Religion and Suicide: New Findings," *Journal of Religion and Health* 57, no. 6 (December 2018): 2478–99, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-018-0629-8.
[128] Mason, "Developing a Theology of Suicide," 12.

it in context, an Asian American woman once shared with me that God punished her by causing her to bear a daughter with schizophrenia who later died of suicide. Thus, I advocate for a life-giving theology and away from theologies that unintentionally bring stigma attached to the word *suicide.*

I have gathered from my literature review that Asian American Christians are situated in in-between positions where many generations have instilled and fostered threads of Confucian values that are operative as a cultural norm in Asian congregations. Thus, it could be meaningful to find common ground that would weave Confucianism with a life-giving theology to address a difficult life topic, suicide. I find that process theology complements well with Confucianism in terms of their philosophies of growth and their emphases on the importance of interrelationships that make up the greater configuration of the web of life.

Therefore, I would like to highlight three ways process theology is compatible with Asian Americans' Confucian cultural values and can serve as a life-giving theology for Asian Americans in terms of suicide. First, the greatest strength of process theology, much like other postmodern theologies, lies in helping us understand our place in the world as relational beings, intertwined with the power of social systems. Process thought can guide our understanding of how power works in our connections with ourselves, one another, and the world, especially as it relates to God's power. The idea that we are all connected means celebrating and encouraging diversity, multiplicity, and wholeness. Process philosophy helps us to move beyond the usual hierarchal and dualistic thinking mediated through Western patriarchy and perpetuated through Christianity: "The dualism of the modern period reflects the privileging of Western categories of reason and the search for a universal truth."[129] Rather than competing with other perspectives to

[129] Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 49.

have *the* Truth, with a capital *T*, of how to address the silence surrounding suicide, process theology, like Confucianism, can make space for liberatory actions to take place. Like Confucianism, process theology can help people shift their viewpoints beyond dualistic categories of black and white, good and evil, and create room to address suicide in a non-threatening way. Above all, process thinkers steer people away from dualistic and hierarchical categories that fuel stereotypes and myths like the model minority.[130]

Instead, process theology takes the reality of an interdependent universe seriously by acknowledging that we cannot escape the influences of our social, cultural, scientific, and religious environments. Rather than dismissing and denying the lived realities of Asian Americans, process thought can take into account the particularities of cultural influences combined with spirituality that impact our faith and well-being. Process theology, in this aspect, offers Asian Americans the opportunity to redress how Christianity itself, combined with cultural pressures, has often contributed to the stigma of suicide and feelings of shame. The Christian religion has consistently been one of the most effective tools for those with elite power to maintain oppression.[131] In this case, the model-minority myth's narrative has kept Asians invisible, and classical religious views within Christianity continue to hinder Christians from seeking healing and reconciliation and so they harbor more shame and stigma.

Epperly points out that, traditionally, we have equated love with being sensitive and caring, while power has been associated with being detached and able to "unilaterally affect others without being affected by them."[132] However, process theology beckons us toward a relational model of power where power is shown through love, not silence, not tolerance, and not

[130] Mesle, *Process Theology*, 80-4
[131] Mesle, 73.
[132] Bruce Gordon Epperly, *Process Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 38.

oppression. Coleman writes, "When one of us chooses to operate in a way that is divergent from God's calling, it influences all of us."[133] In process thought, faith communities are seen as embodiments of God's vision of healing *shalom* for people and the planet.[134] Thus, the church becomes the dynamic body of Christ committed to embracing novelty, whether spiritual or cultural, and to shaping the future through the actions we take today that are relevant to the changing world.[135]

Often, people think that challenging certain ideas is a threat to the "traditional" truth of who God is. God, in a classical view, has all the power there is, can do anything God wants that is not self-contradictory, is omniscient and eternal, and is unchangeable in every respect.[136] To question God and challenge this truth would, from a classical stance, be heresy. However, classical theism would have pious Christians believe that illness, suffering, and what appears to be evil in our eyes is ultimately God's will. Incomprehensible as they may be to our human minds, they are still God's will; they are simply a "blessing in disguise," a blessing hidden from us when we are struggling.

The God who rejoices with us and suffers with us in our pain should lead us to behave unlike the God of classical theology, who is a passive bystander when suffering and loss could be prevented. Unlike classical theology, process thought does not treat suffering as an ennobling condition that leads to spiritual growth.[137] Instead, God suffers with those who are suffering and calls us to join in working against it. Mesle writes, "We should act like the God of process theology, doing what lies within our power to prevent evil and ease suffering."[138] Process theism

[133] Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 55.
[134] Epperly, *Process Theology*, 91.
[135] Epperly, 121.
[136] Mesle, *Process Theology*, 3.
[137] Mesle, 20
[138] Mesle, 24.

teaches us that we should be like God, "whose receptivity necessitates being influenced or in some manner changed by our feelings, decisions, and actions, thereby demonstrating a responsive and therefore credible love."[139] It is a faith community's responsibility to respond with loving support for those who are suffering. The goal is to wring good from the pain without ever calling the pain good.[140]

For the person dealing with mental illness or thoughts of suicide, process theology offers a theological concept of God that does not leave the person feeling abandoned by God. Instead, process theology would have us reexamine and re-image God as loving and caring and sharing in the suffering of our personal experiences. Unlike the traditional theology that tends to be dominant in the Asian American context, the God of process theology does not punish sin and reward the faithful. God does not coerce or will us to obey through suffering and evil. Instead, God is persuasive in always calling us, offering us possibilities to work with God to eliminate corruption and to prevent suffering, unnecessary evil, and what is destructive.

I appreciate that process theology provides some clarity about suicide. In process theology, suicide is not seen as violating God's law or playing God, views that are based on an assumption that God alone has the authority to decide when we die, without our consent. As Epperly puts it, "Sometimes death may be preferable to unremitting anguish as an expression of human and divine compassion and agency."[141] Typically, process theology even goes further to recognize that voluntary euthanasia and physician-aided death are ethically acceptable actions that may be congruent with God's vision.[142] In process theology, God does not will unendurable

[139] Lucinda A. Huffaker, "Feminist Theology in Process Perspective," in *Handbook of Process Theology*, ed. Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006), 179.
[140] Mesle, *Process Theology*, 84.
[141] Epperly, *Process Theology*, 113.
[142] Epperly, 111.

physical or emotional suffering on someone; even if our earthly choices appear to distance us from God, God continues to work in our lives, seeking wholeness in this life and the next, regardless of the circumstances of our deaths.[143] In other words, one's free choice of death does not prevent God's ongoing process of healing and redemption in the afterlife.[144] From Cobb's perspective, enduring inordinate pain diminishes one's quality of life, and "the dread of living on in that way casts a shadow over one's life, a darker shadow, in many cases, than any cast by the expectation of death itself."[145]

Secondly, process theology amplifies our connectedness and interdependent relationships to a level that cannot be ignored. In thinking about how suicide impacts Asian Americans, process theology offers a deep understanding of God's intimate care for God's creation that is intimately relational, which helps us to imagine our relationships with ourselves, our communities, our world, and God in new ways. Process theology challenges us to see ourselves as part of our communities, blending our loyalties with concern for the communities' well-being and the communal context. There is a rich culture that Asian Americans operate out of that diversifies the body of Christ, in which, "if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26, NRSV).

In addition, process theology asserts that God's relationship with the world is continuous rather than distant and discontinuous, where "everything that happens is a product of the past, what's possible, and what we do with those things."[146] Nor does process theology negate the rich history of the past, sometimes dissolving any differences; instead, it embraces the past and the present. In other words, process theologians take a relational approach to the failures and

[143] Epperly, *Process Theology*, 111.
[144] Epperly, 111-12.
[145] John B. Cobb Jr., *Matters of Life and Death* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 44.
[146] Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 51.

achievements of the past and use it create a novel future where creative transformation has taken place; that is, we move into a future that we could not have imagined was possible because God is the one who offers the possibilities luring us to challenge the status quo as we currently experience it or to move toward a vision of the common good.[147] There are novel and creative ways to bring healing and restorative justice to those suffering in the background, often alone.

Asian Americans can break free from clinging to unhelpful theologies that may be more unintentionally harmful than good, especially in terms of suicide. Churches and pastoral caregivers can examine their assumptions on suicide before another tragedy hits the community, bringing more secrets and suffering that are hidden away from the public eye. Rather than assuming and allowing mental illness to be continually perceived as a stigma, church leaders can use process theology as a vehicle for widening people's concerns about the well-being of our siblings and creation. Process theology expands our perspectives by challenging our assumed and fixed theologies, and it helps us begin to realize how opposing variables can have real consequences and ramifications for the health of people and our planet.

Coleman notes with regards to Black American gays and lesbians that theologies of condemnation and tolerance of prejudice and exclusivity often push gays and lesbians out of churches, making them unable to embrace ancestral immortality.[148] She continues,

> These communities can cause ill health for gay and lesbian members, failing to address one of the largest health crises in black American communities. The refusal to affirm healthy sexuality and ethics does not serve the postmodern context nor does its theology provide alternative options for a better way of life but to live in silence without Christian community and the African American religious practices of their upbringing.[149]

[147] Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 165.
[148] Coleman, 154.
[149] Coleman, 157.

As an Asian American, I find that a third way a process theological framework offers a more satisfying and appealing message that reflects God's love for all creation is that complements my cultural background embedded in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shamanism. Like the Buddhist worldview, process theology recognizes the self as a stream of experiences, each intimately related to other experiences by a shared past and a projected future.[150] Process theology considers how we are interdependent in our reality and says that our lives contribute to this reality. Just as I am interdependent with the world, my mind, body, and spirit are intimately interconnected in a holistic way according to process theology.[151] When everything is connected and interdependent, our actions have ramifications. This is a familiar idea in Asian cultures: one is always thinking in relationship to those around oneself and one's environment. One asks, "How will my actions or words impact my family and me? My church? My school? It is never "I" alone, but I in terms of whom I am connected with. Hence, the term *collectivistic* culture has been coined to describe cultures in East Asia that favor the collective or the group. Because we are heavily interdependent in all things, the effects of evil, such as suffering, pain, conflict, discord, and uncertainty, are inherently built into a system that is very much a part of life.

Much like how Confucianism takes in the importance of not just the individual but the greater whole—a way of thinking embedded in the minds of Asian Americans—process theology helps us to look beyond our own purview with a greater interest in the beloved community. Taking a process thought approach can address how suicide is impacting Asian American communities, without stigmatizing and shaming, as the outdated theological messages in Asian American faith communities have done. Often, denying one's experience can destroy a

[150] Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, "Spirit in and through the World," in *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God*, ed. Joseph A. Bracken and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki (New York: Continuum, 1997 or 2005), 173-190.

[151] Epperly, *Process Theology*, 104.

community, since it requires people to "choose between their faith and being their authentic selves."[152] In actuality, communities that have conveyed stigmatizing and shaming theological ideas have opted to use their faith to create greater injustice in the world.[153]

Process theology can literally save the lives of Asian Americans by embracing and honoring our cultural heritage, affirming the lived experiences of so many who struggle with mental health, and wholly accepting that our experiences are real. Rather than dampening our experiences, which have been clouded by confusing theological perspectives and culturally specific barriers, we can embrace them together, collectively and relationally, so that we learn, help others learn, and inject hope by surrounding children with leaders who promote connection, collaboration, and a tight circle of supportive community. As a spiritual caregiver, Carrie Doehring elaborates, "When used to think about collective rather than individual sin, a moral approach helps me understand how familial, social, and cultural systems contribute to the suffering of those struggling with mental illness and that we all, as a society, need to be held accountable for such suffering."[154]

On the other side of the coin, process theology may not be adaptable to addressing suicide and mental health for Asian Americans. Perhaps the greatest limitation lies in the fact that process theology was developed in a Eurocentric, Western context by white men who were highly educated and thus had power. Process theology may prevent people from adopting it because it is highly intellectual. It requires active work of questioning, reasoning, deconstructing, and rebuilding from one's assumed theology. Thus, for process theology to be embraced and

[152] Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 154.
[153] Coleman, 157.
[154] Carrie Doehring, "Searching for Wholeness amidst Traumatic Grief: The Role of Spiritual Practices That Reveal Compassion in Embodied, Relational, and Transcendent Ways," *Pastoral Psychology* 68, no. 3 (June 2019): 241–59, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-018-0858-5.

inform people's theologies, it would need to be introduced and worked out wholeheartedly so that people could embody this new, foreign, and radically different theological perspective. Process theology is also not easily accessible to Asian Americans who do not come in contact with progressive theological perspectives like process theology on a day-to-day basis.

In addition, for process theology as a school of thought to be a viable resource for Asian American Christians in addressing suicide, it needs to become an embodied and shared value that is actively practiced and adapted in a collective setting. However, as we have seen, Asian Americans uphold cultural values that carry over to religious church settings. The cultural norms embedded in faith communities do not lean toward creating openness but rather, greater concealment. For process theology to be actualized and realized in Asian American faith contexts in a way that overrides the cultural norms, thus surpassing crucial cultural factors, would be highly unlikely and rare. However, I do believe process theology can begin to help us debunk harmful theologies and lead us toward healthier embodied lives, where our experiences align with our theologies and where lived experiences are not shunned but viewed through new lenses of understanding, compassion, and grace.

Just as women's liberation theologies, Buddhism, and Native American spiritualities have interacted with each other and brought their rich conversations into process thought and religious pluralism, I like to believe that Asian American Christians have valuable experiences tied to their identities that can deepen their understanding of their rightful place in the universe as people to be celebrated and embraced.

To apply process theology in responding to suicide is to redeem those who have died of suicide. Process theologians do not judge, shame, or silence people's lived experiences, while silence about suicide at a minimum continues to reinforce old, outdated, and irrelevant

theological assumptions and bases for why suicide is often ignored in Christian communities. Operative theologies that say suicide is wrong, sinful, and an unwelcome conversation topic inform people's values, beliefs, and spiritual practices, which then influence people's emotional, physical, and spiritual responses to experiences, especially during times of crisis.

Mason notes that only a few denominations have a clear stance on suicide.[155] It is no wonder that silence continues to prevail in our faith communities. There is a need to gain an understanding of how suicide impacts Asian Americans. Thus, exploring the embedded theologies of suicide operating in the lived experiences of pastors becomes critical work. This leads to my next chapter, which describes the research methodology and methods I used for learning about the lived experiences of Asian American pastors in relation to suicide.

[155] Mason, "Developing a Theology of Suicide," 5.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

Introduction

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, viewed suicide as "self-murder," echoing Augustine and Thomas Aquinas's views on suicide as a mortal sin.[1] Since its inception, when suicide was equated with self-murder or an unforgivable sin, the United Methodist Church has developed a more understanding response by deploring the condemnation of people who die by suicide.[2] Despite increased understanding of the phenomenon of suicide in the social sciences, religion, and other interdisciplinary spheres that inform our worldview, and despite the fact that suicide touches nearly everyone in US culture, little to no impact of this knowledge has been evident within Asian American faith communities. My assumption is that dominant cultural factors mixed with rather traditional theologies, on top of the systemic racism Asian Americans experience on a daily basis, have taken hold of Asian American Christians' psychological and spiritual well-being. Silence hinders faith communities from adequately and compassionately providing care for those affected by the tragedy of suicide.

Objectives

My objectives for my study were threefold. First, I aimed to listen to the lived experiences of Asian American clergy regarding suicide. Second, my research sought to understand the challenges Asian American Christians face in light of the sociohistorical stereotype of the model minority, salient cultural factors such as shame, and embedded theologies operating in their narratives. Third, this study aimed to respond to the clergypersons' narratives by deconstructing embedded theologies and cultivating intentional theologies to help

[1] John Wesley, "Thoughts on Suicide," April 8, 1790, in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 13, *Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, n.d.), 481.

[2] Communications, "Social Principles."

faith leaders in Asian American faith congregations address the silence around suicide better and by providing culturally appropriate prevention, intervention, and postvention strategies for those affected by suicide, ultimately fostering healing that saves lives.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research assumes "that the world is not simply 'out there' waiting to be discovered"; rather, it recognizes "the world" as the result of interpretive processes whereby human beings attempt to make sense of their experiences in the world.[3] Because I sought to look behind the "veil of 'normality'" and to understand what is happening, a qualitative method was most appropriate for my study.[4] It allowed me to explore deep and rich insights into the meanings people place on particular forms of experience.[5] By turning to qualitative research, I was able to fully utilize research methods such as interviewing, coding, transcribing, and, most importantly, hermeneutics to understand my research question better.

Given the vast array of nuanced beliefs on suicide, I employed phenomenology as my empirical method to address an important topic and research problem—one requiring qualitative knowledge, which I framed using the question, "What are the lived experiences of Asian American pastors regarding suicide?[6] Thus, my study intended to uncover Asian American Christians' views on suicide by honing in on the lived experiences of Asian American pastors in terms of suicide. By doing so, I, as the researcher, was able to describe in detail our reality in ways that enable us to understand the world differently, and in understanding it differently, we can begin to act differently.[7]

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[3] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2016), 29.

[4] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, vi.

[5] Swinton and Mowat, 30.

[6] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 134.

[7] Swinton and Mowat, 257.

In addition to phenomenology, I employed the methods of practical theology and Carrie Doehring's approach to pastoral care, examining the shared essence of Asian American pastors' embedded theologies on suicide, in order to investigate my research question.

Phenomenology

One qualitative research method is hermeneutic phenomenology, which is both a methodology and a method. For this study, I engaged in hermeneutic phenomenology to use my unique position to understand the essence of the lived experiences of the research participants. The key words here are *understanding* and describing *the essence* of the inner worlds of the participants. It helps to understand that phenomenological study is a philosophy. There are many philosophical perspectives on phenomenology. What binds them all together as a phenomenological approach is that phenomenological study is very much about the lived experiences of persons. It describes what the participants have in common as they experience a shared phenomenon.

The phenomenological method goes back to when mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) initially advocated for a new approach to inquire about the consciousness of humans.[8] He took seriously the idea that bias and prejudice cannot have any part in research, but rather, it should start with unprejudiced description.[9] Ultimately, Husserl aimed to investigate humans in a scientifically appropriate way, but in a way that was different from the methods of the physical sciences, and he came to influence research in what are now the social and health sciences, sociology, and education.[10] He emphasized human consciousness and sought to gain the essence of a phenomenon through examining first-person lived experiences; to do so, he

[8] Wertz, *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 126.
[9] Wertz, *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 53.
[10] Wertz, *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 52.

recorded thick descriptions of these experiences that brought together the how and what of the subjects' experiences.[11] Phenomenological research attempts to understand a person's experience, which includes perceptions and perspectives, leading ultimately to an understanding of the person's lived experience. Later, one of Husserl's students would branch off from his philosophy by stating that researchers cannot completely separate and "bracket" themselves from their studies. This shows the two major threads of phenomenological study: Husserl's transcendental/psychological phenomenological study and Heidegger's interpretive/hermeneutic phenomenology.

One of the major assumptions in a transcendental phenomenological study is that my biases and experiences as a researcher are irrelevant to the study because they are bracketed. Therefore, my assumptions and preunderstandings about the study are suspended, and I would want to completely disconnect myself from the study and enter the research from an alien's perspective. On the other hand, in hermeneutic phenomenological study, my biases and assumptions are critical and relevant since I, as the researcher, cannot truly set aside my assumptions and biases and keep from interjecting them into the study. Therefore, I must identify my prejudices and any new biases that emerge by journaling about them and what I plan to do to address them as they become data to be analyzed.

In order to address my own biases and bring credibility to my research, I referred to Lincoln and Guba's evaluative criteria, which include prolonged engagement, thick description, inquiry audit, and reflexivity. Using these techniques increases trust and rapport between the researcher and the participants because the researcher spends sufficient time working to rise above their own preconceptions. Furthermore, to systematically attend to my constructions of my

[11] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 76.

research, I also utilized journaling as a regular practice to note my thoughts and identity and what was happening in terms of my own values and interests.[12]

Hermeneutic phenomenology begins by recognizing that our experiences of the world around us are full of meanings to be interpreted. The key is to bring light to a particular experience's lived meanings.[13] Therefore, I, as the researcher, attempted to shed light on the lived experiences of suicide among Asian Americans by interpreting the meaning of their lived experiences.[14] The purpose of a phenomenological study is to "faithfully conceptualize the processes and structures of mental life, how situations are meaningfully lived through as they are experienced."[15] In other words, one seeks to understand what has been experienced and how one's research participants experienced it. In essence, phenomenology attempts to describe what all the participants have in common: the phenomena as they appear before they are interpreted and explained.

It made the most sense to utilize a phenomenological method because my study aimed to bring to light the experiences of Asian American Christians regarding suicide, experiences that had not been reflected on previously, and to make meaning of those experiences. Asian Americans and Asian American Christians have experienced silence and indifference for too long as a normal response to suicide in their communities and faith communities. Our society feeds off categorizing and generalizing Asian Americans as the model minority, sustaining false beliefs and prejudices that jeopardize the very health and lives of Asian Americans. Focusing on Asian American pastors' lived experiences of suicide is taking a step of exploring an area of

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[12] Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985), 327.

[13] Erika Goble and Yin Yin, "Introduction to Hermeneutic Phenomenology: A Research Methodology Best Learned by Doing It," *IIQM—The Qualitative Research Blog*, October 16, 2014, https://iiqm.wordpress.com/2014/10/16/introduction-to-hermeneutic-phenomenology-a-research-methodology-best-learned-by-doing-it/.

[14] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 82.

[15] Wertz, *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 124.

concern that needs to be addressed. To understand Asian American pastors' beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of suicide, in-depth interviews, a primary method used in phenomenological study, were carried out to provide "thick" and "rich" descriptions of the pastors' personal lived experiences related to suicide. In these in-depth interviews, I asked open-ended questions, which allowed participants to describe the meaning of the phenomenon as they experienced it and what it meant for them.

Practical Theology

Practical theology fills the gap between theology and praxis. It is the intersection "where religious belief, tradition and practice meets contemporary experiences, questions and actions and conducts a dialogue which is mutually enriching, intellectually critical and practically transforming."[16] Practical theology engages in dialogue with various fields, disciplines, and theories, such as the social sciences, postmodernism, and liberation theology, understanding that "there is no such thing as a view from nowhere, a text without a context, subtext or pretext, or an essay without an author formed of dust and social forces."[17] According to John S. Klaasen, "Practical theology attempts to answer the question: how do Christians make sense in an ever-increasing secular society? One way of answering the question is to say that practical theology draws on practical reason to answer the more fundamental question: What is going on?"[18]

Practical theology is also a qualitative method that seeks to understand critically and theologically the practices carried out in churches and the world. Since practical theologians are "embedded in their own preferred practices and theories, descriptive research is necessarily a

[16] Stephen Pattison, *A Vision of Pastoral Theology: In Search of Words that Resurrect the Dead* (Edinburgh: Contact Pastoral Limited Trust, 1994), 9.

[17] Stephen Pattison, *The Challenge of Practical Theology: Selected Essays* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007), 12, http://www.123library.org/book_details/?id=2341.

[18] John S. Klaasen, "Practical Theology: A Critically Engaged Practical Reason Approach of Practice, Theory, Practice and Theory," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 70, no. 2 (2014): 1–6, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i2.1950.

historically situated dialogue."[19] Practical theology takes great interest in describing and thickening the narratives of "practices in order to discern the conflicting cultural and religious meanings that guide our actions and provoke the questions that animate our practical thinking."[20] Naturally, it involves creating descriptions of human practices that "capture in all their richness the basic questions practical theology takes back to its classics. Its interests are practical because, in the end, it wants to appreciate and criticize current social, cultural, and ecclesial practices."[21]

Practical theology, in conjunction with qualitative research, provides an avenue to explore our world beyond our simplistic assumptions and traditional knowledge. It holds us accountable to seek "hidden depths of human experience," which expand our understanding of not only ourselves but also God and one another.[22] It allows us to slow down and engage in the process of transcending the mundane nature of each moment in order to unveil the essence of the phenomenon to be explored.

John Swinton and Harriet Mowat define practical theology as critical, theological reflection on the church's practices as they interact with the practices of the world in order to ensure and enable faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in and for the world.[23] Practical theology takes the lived experiences of humans seriously as "places" where the gospel is grounded, embodied, interpreted, and lived out.[24] Its goal is to guide people toward "the future practices which will inform and shape the life of faith."[25] In other words, by using practical theology as an interpretive discipline to put theological and social scientific knowledge into

[19] Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposal* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 48.
[20] Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 48.
[21] Browning, 93.
[22] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 259.
[23] Swinton and Mowat, 6.
[24] Swinton and Mowat, 5.
[25] Swinton and Mowat, 12.

dialogue with my empirical data, I was able to challenge the current understandings, assumptions, and practices around suicide. I did this by privileging the narratives of Asian American pastors, giving special attention to their human life experiences (the practice of concern) and their reflections on their embedded Christian theologies.

As I have mentioned, practical theology is a discipline of critical theological reflection on Christian practices. The task of the practical theologian is to explore the interplay between the practices of churches, the experiences of Christians, and the practices of the world.[26] Practical theology as a discipline becomes a vehicle through which I, as a pastor and a scholar, am given the permission to "see" the world in a new light and to discover things I was unaware of before, expanding my knowledge and experiences of this world, making my understanding much more complex. These new pieces become interwoven into the fabric of my life. I appreciate that practical theology sees the world as a whole, not just a bunch of parts. Over the years, had churches not learned from modern sciences to use the interpretative tool of questioning why something was happening, we would still be relating to the mentally ill as demon-possessed people instead of people ravaged by a disorder of the brain.[27] Hence, practical theology is a serious inquiry seeking to understand the relationship between what is done and what is said or professed.[28] It is fueled by a desire to seek truth but always in relation to action. Practical theology must intersect with theology, the social sciences, art, and socio-economics, to name a few fields of study. By doing so, practical theology not only complexifies and explores situations that would appear normal, it also evokes and raises up people's previously hidden and unchallenged understandings and views.[29]

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[26] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 7.
[27] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 94.
[28] Swinton and Mowat, 11.
[29] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 13-4.

The best way to hone in on the human experiences of Asian Americans in a time like this, when violence against Asian Americans continues to surge, is to acknowledge that the "scope of practical theology" includes the entire "web of life."[30] I take this to mean that nothing practical theology does is separate or disconnected from the reality that makes up our lives; thus, it informs our interconnectedness and the fragility of our relationships. The countless number of deaths by suicide in Asian American communities may seem irrelevant to some. However, practical theology would remind us that the suffering and deaths of Asian Americans not only affect Asian Americans but all who are part of "God's ongoing mission of redemption to the world."[31] The task is to discern "discrepancies in the practices of the Church and the world and to point towards more authentic alternatives."[32] On the flip side, perhaps the greatest weakness in practical theology is that the rigorous work of theological reflection does not guarantee a change of practices in the church.

To aid in understanding the lived experiences of Asian American pastors in relation to suicide in Asian American faith communities, I utilize Richard R. Osmer's four core tasks of practical theology. These tasks raise questions about why we practice and do what we do, and they call practical theologians to reflect critically on current practices that have been overlooked or not been questioned. The disconnect between the number of suicides in the Asian American population and the minimal response from the church is telling in practical theological terms. What is the church's role if the church does not and cannot respond to the practical cries of her people? Where is God when we suffer? Research on religious coping has looked at what beliefs and practices are most helpful and enduring and specifically, which ones help us overcome

[30] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 16.
[31] Swinton and Mowat, 9.
[32] Swinton and Mowat, 25.

suffering.[33] For Asian Americans experiencing suffering, either God does not care enough to do anything about their pain, or God feels ashamed about suicide and is only concerned with positive human experiences. The silence of the church seems to strengthen Asian Americans' "action-guiding ideologies and belief systems" that tell them this is the kind of God we worship, a God who is not affected by our pain.[34] By omitting any mention of suicide in the church, the church fails to embrace the full breadth and depth of Asian Americans' experiences—thus failing to be relevant to the very lived experiences that are part of being an Asian American in the US. Furthermore, practical theologians in Korea are "obligated to suggest a new pastoral paradigm to help the church sustain its growth."[35] But this only describes one thread among multiple strands needing interpretation. In complexifying the context of Asian American Christians' experiences with suicide, something currently missing in the field of pastoral theology, practical theology became the right vehicle for discerning the "conflicting cultural and religious meanings that guide our actions."[36]

I first gathered thick descriptions of rich, meaning-filled information for my descriptive-empirical effort to understand "why is this going on?" and to place the participants' experiences into a more extended narrative framework (the descriptive-empirical task). Second, I applied myself to the task of interpretation by asking, "Why is this going on?" (the interpretive task). This task requires being willing to learn from other fields of knowledge and sources within contemporary culture, an essential component if the church is to offer the moral and theological

[33] Leonard M. Hummel, "A Kind of Religious Coping: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis of Consolation in the Lutheran Tradition," *Archiv Für Religionspsychologie / Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 24 (2002): 85-96.

[34] Stephen Pattison and James Woodward, "An Introduction to Pastoral and Practical Theology," in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 12.

[35] Meerha Hahn, "South Korea," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 542.

[36] Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 48.

means to make wise use of human knowledge.[37] The interpretative task allowed me to engage in the disciplines of other fields, such as Asian American studies, psychology, process theology, and pastoral theology, in order to grasp more fully and faithfully what allows for such dynamics to take place.

The last two tasks include the normative task (What ought to be going on?) and the pragmatic task (How might we respond?). To answer the question, "What ought to be going on?" Osmer suggests asking what is not happening. Churches and faith leaders who often deal with crises and life-and-death issues ought to be the first responders to emergencies, especially in cases with those on the verge of ending their life. Asian American churches are not collectively making a clear statement that the well-being of the Asian American community is a concern. It is not happening. When they do respond, people in churches whisper rumors in the background, and collectively, people of East Asian descent from Confucian cultures can't help but try to ease the community's trouble by sticking with the rule of thumb called "don't rock the boat." At the same time, the high number of suicide deaths beckons our communities and churches to be more active in taking a central role in *prevention*, intervention, and postvention to reach more Asian Americans struggling to live. Osmer's fourth and final task is to "determine strategies of action that will influence situations" and make them more desirable.[38] In all, Osmer's core tasks are a critical approach for gathering ideas about what might help Asian American churches respond better interculturally, theologically, and contextually to suicide in Asian American contexts.

Embedded Theology in Intercultural Care

I utilized Carrie Doehring's intercultural approach to pastoral care to unpack the thoughts, feelings, values, and practices shared by Asian American pastors regarding suicide. I

[37] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 83.
[38] Osmer, 176.

did this by examining the embedded theologies of Asian American pastors. Issues and episodes like suicide raise existential questions—that is, questions about life and death. The intentional process of moving away from our embedded theology and critically reflecting on our current and operating theologies is called deliberative theology. When an embedded theology, one formed long ago in childhood, no longer serves to redeem or accurately address the needs of today, we can take a significant step forward by questioning this theology. We may go back to the sacred texts that have informed our personal life experiences, and we may interpret scriptures or experiences differently than before; these processes will influence and shape how we understand God and how theologies function in our communities.

Pastoral care begins with an acknowledgment that historical, geographical, socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts must be considered when approaching care. While previous research in the social sciences and practical theology was done through the lens of Western values and ideals embedded within and imposed upon the goals of pastoral caregiving, more attention has now been given to making room for contextual theologies to be developed and heard. Doehring writes, "The purpose of spiritual care is liberative spiritual integration that aligns practices, beliefs, and values in ways that liberate persons, families, and communities."[39] Implied in this statement is the continuous communal relationship that must take place along this journey. To bring about great changes will require boldly remaining authentic to our culturally specific lived experiences and advocating for culturally nuanced, liberative integration that weaves our experiences into a more holistic living. In addition, Doehring's understanding of intercultural pastoral care expresses values found in process theology:

> I use the term intercultural to describe pastoral and spiritual care as a co-creative process of intermingling stories and lives. This generative process changes care seekers and

[39] Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 15.

> caregivers, as well as their relationships, families, communities, cultures, and even, as I believe, God. . . . The preposition "inter" in the term intercultural conveys the intermingling effects of change that move back and forth across relational webs, when caregivers respect care seekers and care seekers in turn trust caregivers."[40]

I chose to adopt Doehring's approach to pastoral care as a helpful instrument for examining the embedded theologies operating in the context of Asian American faith communities. Examining one's embedded theology is an opportunity to "excavate [unconscious] beliefs, values, and habitual ways of coping and [to] decide whether such embedded theologies are still relevant and meaningful, especially in terms of helping [one] connect with a sense of the sacred."[41] In the past, embedded theologies have held suicide to be an immoral act or something to be judged; thus, the sacred work of forming intentional beliefs through human relationships becomes all the more critical for redeeming the harm done by others. Doehring's approach to looking at embedded theology helped me better understand how Asian American pastors view suicide as expressed by their lived experiences and how their embedded theologies aligned with how they understood suicide. Deconstructing embedded theologies and cultivating intentional or deliberative theologies can illuminate what contributes to the silence surrounding suicide. Intercultural pastoral care offers pastoral leaders, caregivers, Christian communities, and care seekers a compassionate way to reexamine embedded beliefs, values, and coping skills that restrict communities and churches and keep people from living their lives to the fullest.

Reflexivity

An essential requirement when practicing a qualitative method is the active use of critical reflexivity.[42] Theologians John Swinton and Harriet Mowat define reflexivity as "the process of critical self-reflection carried out by the researcher throughout the research process that enables

[40] Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care*, xix.
[41] Doehring, 19.
[42] Wertz, *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 84

her to monitor and respond to her contribution to the proceedings."[43] The ability to practice critical reflexivity on the researcher's part is essential because, when conducting qualitative research, the researcher both influences and is affected by the research process, thereby becoming the primary research tool for interpreting the data.[44] Therefore, much power was afforded to me as a researcher in how I drove forward my study. I privileged the interviewees' voices by pre-working out my theology around suicide and by examining my thoughts with my therapist in order to uncover my assumptions, biases, and cultural and spiritual beliefs about mental health and suicide. I adhered to Doehring's intercultural approach, which states that intentional theologies can only come from compassionate spiritual practices that acknowledge embedded theologies.

Furthermore, to counteract the imbalance of power between me and my research participants and to actively engage in the process of reflexivity, I took notes and journaled about them before and after the interviews and throughout the research process. These written reflections became additional data and helped me recognize my biases and assumptions. This practice of critical reflexivity also included my reflections on how I felt during and after the interviews, which I ascertained by paying attention to my bodily sensations. I noted and highlighted my impressions and running thoughts in a written document, which helped me better connect with the research as a personal project. Meanwhile, the gathered text of my written reflexivity work also became a "living human document," making the depth of my experiences worthy of understanding and interpretation.[45] As one can imagine, without self-awareness from reflecting critically and reflexively, I could have quickly derailed and skewed the outcomes of

[43] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 59.
[44] Swinton and Mowat, 60–61.
[45] Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2019), chap. 1, ProQuest Ebook Central.

my research unintentionally with abuse of power, ethical irresponsibility, and exploitation.[46] For example, it is monumental to recognize that the researcher holds considerable power compared to the interviewee. Without the discipline of reflexivity, I could have easily abused my power and imposed my values on Asian American pastors' lived experiences with suicide.

In "Pastoral Counseling with Disabled Persons in Korean Contexts," K. Samuel Lee points out how one's unexamined embedded theology, which has been nurtured by one's society's repeated responses to specific topics, can harm the very people entrusted to one's care as a pastoral counselor.[47] Lee notes that pastoral counselors are responsible for assessing their own embedded theologies that might unconsciously intrude into the counseling relationship. He also criticizes the historical and cultural use of everyday words that refer to disabilities, and he and Kathleen J. Greider discuss the implications of how unexamined words and language can negatively reinforce marginalization, subjugation, stigmatization, and discrimination.[48] For example, phrases like "committed suicide," which surface in our everyday conversations and our popular culture, can contribute to furthering stigmatizing suicide by associating criminality with the act of suicide.

Reflexive work binds the researcher to the work of the study. The process of reflection, combining psychodynamic and cultural self-reflexivity with an awareness of how one's social location and status influence one's theological meaning-making, can change the world.[49] Such reflexivity monitors how one's theologies formed in childhood and young adulthood interface

[46] Wertz, *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 84-5.

[47] K. Samuel Lee, "Pastoral Counseling with Disabled Persons in Korean Contexts" in *Theological Implications for Disability Ministry*, ed. Lee Jae-suh (Seoul, Korea: Segye Milal, 2018), 231-256.

[48] Lee, "Pastoral Counseling with Disabled Persons in Korean Contexts," 233; Kathleen J. Greider, "Religious Location and Counseling: Engaging Diversity and Difference in Views of Religion," in *Navigating Religious Difference in Spiritual Care and Counseling: Essays in Honor of Kathleen J. Greider*, ed. Jill L. Snodgrass (Claremont, CA: Claremont Press, 2019), 11-44.

[49] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 258.

with ongoing religious practices and theological meaning-making and how social systems influence meaning-making.[50] Thus, theological reflexivity can be significantly rich and potentially insightful. For me, it created new understandings of suicide among Asian American Christians by helping me bridge between the field of practical theology and the social sciences.

Participants and the Research Process

The five participants in this study were Asian American men or women who identified as pastors serving Asian American Christian congregations in the Pacific Northwest region and Hawaii and who were willing to share their personal understandings of and experiences with suicide. Their ages ranged from early thirties to mid-fifties. Three of the participants identified themselves as second-generation Asian Americans, people born and raised in the US. Two other participants were born in their home country and immigrated twenty plus years ago. I note this to mark that acculturation into US culture was also embedded in their experiences.

My primary qualitative research method was interviewing. By interviewing participants, I focused on the "human [lived] experience as a 'place' where the gospel is grounded, embodied, interpreted and lived out."[51] I used in-depth interviews and open-ended questions as I, the researcher, attempted to understand the phenomena of Asian American pastors' lived experiences of and views about suicide. Since the interviews were conducted during April and May 2021, I and each interviewee mutually assessed the best way to conduct the interview so that it was safe according to the CDC recommendations during the height of the global pandemic. All interviews were private and conducted at a mutually agreed-upon time on Zoom, an online platform for video conferencing, so that they could be free of interruption and

[50] Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care*, 18-9.
[51] Swinton and Mowat, 5.

confidentiality protected. It was important for participants to share their narratives in a place where they feel relatively safe, even on Zoom.

Participants were given a consent form two weeks before the interview via email. Each participant and I reviewed the consent form together and engaged in a short discussion about selecting their pseudonym, if they wanted one. All participants chose to receive a final, digital consent form signed by the researcher and the participant. Interviews ran sixty to seventy-five minutes, with the understanding that follow-up interviews might be requested. One interview was conducted in Korean, and the others in English. Interviews were digitally video- and audio-recorded using the Zoom program. Each interview began with the researcher asking an open-ended question about the participant's context, identity, and role within his or her faith community. The interviews follow a semi-structured format responsive to the content articulated by participants. I asked appropriate follow-up questions to ensure understanding and to generate detailed descriptions.

The interview questions included the following: What is your understanding of suicide? How was suicide talked about in your community of faith or church when you were growing up? What are some of the barriers to talking more openly about suicide in your faith community? What role did your church family play in your ability to speak about or ask questions about mental health? How does shame play a part in Asian American cultures in relation to suicide? How do stigmatization or taboos surrounding mental health play a role in our society today? Participants were given the autonomy to share as much as they would like. I was cognizant of the reality that participants may not have had many opportunities to share their views on suicide openly. Although being heard and listened to can be healing and validating in some cases, it can also risk triggering thoughts, feelings, and psychosomatic symptoms, and these could surface

during or after the interview. I was mindful to read non-verbal cues and to take breaks if needed. I let the participants know that if they wanted to pause the interview at any time, I would pause the recording of the video and we would take a break. When participants chose to take a break, their decisions were respected, and the interviews resumed when they ready. Participants were also assured that if at any point in the study they desired to withdraw from the research, they could do so.

All data collected in the study were treated with utmost care to protect the identities of the participants. The video digital recordings of the interviews on Zoom were saved to my personal laptop computer, which is password-protected. I transcribed the interviews and stored them on the same computer. All data pertaining to the study were kept in password-protected files. All hard copies, such as notes taken during the interviews, were typed up and saved in a password-protected folder on my computer. The hard documents were immediately shredded and disposed of after the notes were transcribed. I, as the researcher, was the only person with access to the password for opening and accessing the laptop that held these sensitive materials. All materials collected during the research will be permanently deleted by May 2025.

Data Analysis

In the phenomenological approach, data analysis begins with developing clusters of meaning from textual and structural descriptions of the participants' lived experiences in order to gain an understanding of the shared experience of the participants.[52] First, I transcribed all the interviews and then played the audio 0.5 times slower to capture words and images previously missed at average speed. To analyze the interview transcriptions and highlight significant statements and quotes around how participants experienced suicide, I utilized the

[52] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 193.

HyperRESEARCH software to draw out the essence of, or themes from, the interviews. After obtaining a feel for the content of the interviews by reading the transcribed materials multiple times, I began to identify sentences and remarks that pertained to the pastors' experiences surrounding suicide. I highlighted and coded words or phrases that revealed embedded theologies and that seemed to repeat. This process also helped me leave out irrelevant information. Later, these coded elements were grouped into their own identified categories, which emerged as relevant or insightful themes.

Along with this analysis of the data, I searched for sub-themes or other essences that might shed light on the data. I used HyperRESEARCH to further analyze repeated words, to create and keep track of themes, and to draw diagrams, charts, or word clouds to visually interpret the data in different modes in order to gain as much information as possible. I used a similar approach to analyze my reflections and reflexivity work as data. I searched for themes and words that pertain to the experiences of Asian American pastors regarding suicide to draw out additional insights. These data interpretations will be presented in the following chapter.

Conclusion

Up to this time, a limited number of studies have paid attention to the high number of Asian Americans dying by suicide. It might be easy in US society to minimize these numbers as a norm. Still, on a theological and ethical level, we can no longer stand by as bystanders while suicide and mental illness continue to fracture the lives of Asian Americans of all ages. By integrating the disciplines of practical theology and phenomenology—particularly by paying attention to the common experiences shared by Asian American pastors and by using Doehring's approach to pastoral care—I have sought through this study to address this crucial issue and to

provide the needed insight into how faith leaders can participate in changing the legacy of suicide, especially in our Asian American churches and communities.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

In this chapter, I share the results and learnings I gained from analyzing my data. Through my data analysis, four themes emerged in answer to my research question, "What are Asian American pastors' lived understandings of suicide?" These themes are "encountering suicide," "developing theological imagination," "filtering pastoral authority through a cultural lens, or acting out the role of the 'good' Asian American pastor," and "sharing our/*ou-ri* stories." After describing these thematic findings, I conclude the chapter by sharing how my findings complexify the silence surrounding suicide in Asian communities, while at the same time introducing chapter five.

Many studies have assumed that pastors in Christian congregations have an influential role, if not the most crucial role, in gatekeeping messages transmitted to their parishes and in equipping lay leaders. What has not been addressed by these studies has been the question of what contributes to the silence surrounding suicide in Asian American churches. It is imperative as church leaders in Asian American contexts that pastors ensure that the members of their church families get along harmoniously as a group. For instance, "cohesiveness and intact family unity are strengths in Asian American families," and this also applies to Asian churches as families.[1] Transgressing social norms such as filial piety, traditional gender roles, and maintaining family obligations can bring shame upon one's family, which can limit possibilities for growth.[2] Since Asian American pastors are key representatives of their church families, they too are bound to stay within cultural norms. At all crossroads, Asian American pastors and their

[1] Tan, "Marriage, Family, and Parenting," 41-62.

[2] Eddie C. Y. Kuo, "Confucianism and the Chinese Family in Singapore: Continuities and Changes," in *Confucianism and the Family*, ed. George A. De Vos and Walter H. Slote (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 231.

congregations engage in a dance, and to move out of step can put a pastor at "odds" with being a "good" pastor. This is a theme that pertains explicitly to Asian American pastors in Asian American communal settings like churches.

All the interviews were undertaken with a mutual understanding that my research was about exploring Asian American pastors' lived experiences and learning what their understandings of suicide were. The five Asian American men and women pastors engaged with me as the interviewer in a friendly manner throughout the interviews. I knew some of the pastors through attending conferences and being involved in the wider jurisdiction of my denomination. Except for one participant, all the pastors were new to me, and I had not previously worked with any of them. In the interviews, I was surprised by the open nature of many of the participants' views on suicide and mental health. It is possible that the participants had been given time to ponder the high rate of suicide in Asian communities and thus were prepared to be sensitive to the topic. Even so, far more participants were able to describe candidly their positions on suicide than I had expected, and those views were more understanding than I had assumed they would be.

After I had completed most of the interviews, I became concerned that I had somehow unintentionally only selected Asian American pastors who had an open stance on suicide. This was because of my ill-assumed thinking—an overriding bias running in my mind—that many Asian American pastors secretly hold a punitive and harsh view of suicide, especially in terms of their theology about suicide. Given the power that is bestowed upon religious leaders like Asian American pastors by their churches, they surely ought to know about and be on the alert for opportunities to preach and teach their Asian American congregations about critical topics like suicide and mental health with urgency. Or so I liked to imagine.

As a pastor myself, I was intrigued by my blindness, a continued bias that seeped up in my data analysis. When my assumptions were challenged, I became as fascinated by the shift in the narrative that I failed to recognize initially. Confronting my bias and preconception through Lincoln and Guba's criteria showed that I limited my understanding and the scope of my research by engaging in interpreting the themes in a dichotomous way. I glossed over seeing the beauty of data in the entire process of the research as a whole. Rather I let my own advancement and advocacy for process thought as a prevailing theological framework to challenge the more conservative or traditional views of God in Asian American churches. At the same time, I can attest to the process God, the benefit of embracing wholeness through both/and sphere.

First, contrary to my bias, almost all of my research participants had an open understanding of suicide. But their ability to interject their authority on topic of suicide or other difficult topics to discuss in Asian cultures had more to do with working within cultural norms. There was genuine fear of transgressing communal norms.

In some ways, it was difficult at first to draw out themes because each participant's background and lived experience was truly unique, and the participants were very different from each other in terms of their ages, years in ministry, church settings, and families of origin. But there were also unique overlaps; for example, most of the participants were the second or third generation of pastors in their families, and one of their parents was the third or fourth generation of a Christian family.

Generally, all the participants were very familiar with Asian church dynamics and highly knowledgeable about East Asian cultures. Most of them had firsthand experience of growing up in Asian American churches. They came from families of pastors or they had married and become a pastor's wife first. Themes like shame and the values derived from a Confucian

background that are embedded in Asian American Christians were understood as common sense. Several participants readily shared how shame operates in the minds of many of their Korean and Japanese American congregants. All openly acknowledged shame as a cultural phenomenon in Asian cultures, including Asian American churches. Many recognized that the fear of "loss of face" or the concern over "saving face" in a communal setting like the Asian church can easily stifle a person from disclosing concerns and cause people to keep "secrets" themselves.

In describing the cultural background of the Asian American church she co-leads with a male Asian American pastor, Deanna shared,

> I don't know how theologically to think about it. But I guess I'll just speak for a Japanese culture. There's just like this thing about shame within the culture, you know. It's so shame driven. You have to, if you dishonor your family, might as well kill yourself, you know, from the o-o-o-l-l-d country. And I think that comes out in ways here in the Japanese American community in terms of like keeping things secret and, and not seeking help and support. This, this whole kind of like isolation thing in moments of crisis when *really* we need community and folks to come, alongside us.

Others also noted that shame hinders their congregants from being vulnerable and open with one another, an essential component of building healthy and faithful relationships with siblings in Christ. Many also speculated that their congregations' members refrain from sharing personal concerns as part of a cultural norm that says it is important not to burden others and cause them discomfort and unease. This affirms previous studies that suggest many Asian Americans forgo seeking help for this very reason. Words like *self-sufficiency*, *cultural expectation*, and *shame* were used to describe reasons for these behaviors. What needs to be noted here is that there is a communal understanding of how shame operates in culturally Asian communities; there is a unified understanding that shame is deeply ingrained and embedded in Asian communities. Participants also held the view that they did not expect their congregation members to share their negative feelings and thoughts so readily.

And yet, Asian American pastors in my study had a collective yearning and a dream that their Asian American church members will be radically inclusive and vulnerable with one another and that they will confess their wrongdoings and grow with one another, justly and humbly loving God.[3] This dream, as it turns out, is intertwined and interlocked with cultural understandings that must be first examined and digested before pastors can act and speak in a way that moves people toward actualizing those dreams.

Seeing the world through their particular cultural lenses plays a vital role in Asian American pastors' understandings of suicide and mental health concerns. However, the way that cultural perspectives affect congregants' communal responses can sometimes inhibit participants' pastoral theological agency in their ministerial settings. This is part of the cultural dance that pastors and their congregations sometimes engage in without even knowing they are on the dance floor.

With this background, I will now explore the four distinct themes related to my research question that emerged through the interviews.

Encountering Suicide

Some of the findings in my research affirmed the most recent literature on Asian Americans and suicide. Many participants' awareness of suicide and suicide survivors in their pews eerily echoed the silence about suicide in the lives of Asian American churches. Only one person knew someone in their pastoral care context who had been affected by suicide. No other pastors knew of current suicide loss survivors in their pews. While the pastors may be unaware of active or inactive members in their churches who are suicide loss survivors, most likely there

[3] "Bible Gateway Passage."

are more than a few suicide loss survivors and members hiding their suicidal ideation currently worshipping alongside others in the sanctuary.

However, their understandings of suicide did include their own experiences of suicidal distress. Their narratives reflected the behaviors of hidden suicidal ideation (HSI) found in many Asian Americans experiencing distress. They refrained from disclosing and hiding their suicidal ideation or intent from their loved ones and thus it is likely that Asian Americans who are suicidal in the pews may not be identifiable.

Like other Asian Americans, they attributed their stressors to academic problems, racism, interpersonal shame, difficulties meeting family expectations, and bullying. Interestingly, the primary concern about death by suicide in my participants who were suicidal was not a fear of going to hell—a religious view embedded in the family of origin—but rather a concern about its "sinfulness." At the same time, all expressed grave concerns about how their actions would ultimately impact the people closest to them, like family members.

The first theme that relates to my research participants' understandings of suicide is their encounters with suicide. Participants' direct personal encounters informed their understandings of suicide and influenced their identities and approaches to ministry. These encounters include a personal lived experience of thoughts of suicide or suicidality, ministering to someone at risk of suicide, losing someone significant to suicide, meeting a suicide loss survivor, and learning opportunities on the topic of suicide. It is an encounter with suicide, passive or active, that stirs one to change one's view of suicide.

Encountering suicide in one way or form early in life later directly impacted a participant's approach to doing ministry. In encountering suicide, participants learned new information and gained new resources, sometimes through an expert in the mental health field,

that changed how they had previously thought about and understood suicide. More often than not, each encounter seemed to increase a participant's compassion, knowledge, and positive view of God as a compassionate God. Each encounter was different: some were highly personal and others were more passive, such as observing their parents respond pastorally to a suicide in their church. Notably, these encounters with suicide, both passive and active, were marked as points where a shift took place in the participants' understandings of mental health and also their identities as pastors.

Wesley's encounter learning about suicide was during his role serving as a chaplain. Not only did Wesley's encounter with suicide as a chaplain change the way he understood suicide, it changed the way he speaks about suicide. He now talks about suicide in his ministry in a way that better aligns with his view of suicide:

> That language, right, like, you know, when I was a chaplain we had to learn, and I had to really reconfigure my mind that it's not a committed suicide but it's died by suicide or death by suicide or, you know. It's understanding of, like, decriminalizing, even like suicide and, you know. Those who attempt to end their life in that way we are often like, you know, you get a citation, right, like in some states where you're like, when you try to kill yourself and therefore because you failed, we're gonna get you this ticket, and then after that, right. So society, it's such an unhealthy view of which I had to reconfigure and relearn.

A few participants shared about being suicidal at some point in their lives, while others shared encounters with someone in their care who later died of suicide. Their encounters continued to mold them and influence them. For Geordi, his first encounter with suicide was his personal lived experience of being suicidal as a child. He explained the immense pressure he felt under his dad's parenting, which involved physical punishment:

So for me, my first understanding and concept and even consideration of suicide were when I was five. I was a kindergartner contemplating suicide. Um, there was a sense of isolation that I experienced, a sense of pressure, a sense of not, um, having enough support and feeling like so much of what I was doing was pointless, useless. So just breathing and existing was just a question as a five-year-old [nervous laughter].

After taking a few child development classes, Geordi's dad admitted that his parenting may have been harsh. Throughout his schooling, Geordi recalls being suicidal at different phases of his life: At that time, I was so stressed out about school and failing, just emotionally not connecting, um, feeling isolated. Piano lessons drove me crazy because I wasn't good enough, and with such a perfectionist mindset there, and I was getting bullied at a new school. And then feeling like I wasn't living up to expectations for myself and from others, that I cared for. I felt pretty . . . I said, "What's the point?"

What stopped Geordi from a suicide attempt was the concern for others significant to him, such as his best friend, his only brother, and his parents, or an encounter with a friend who changed his perspective:

> And then later in high school, I wasn't suicidal, but the feeling! So suicide then, had then passed through me. And because that to me, like I'm not going to commit suicide, because that to me, the people I love, would be too hard on them. Minding my life was not to just end it for myself and get back at them, but I didn't want to suffer anymore, but I realized I don't also want others to suffer. Now later on in high school, I think, a friend, I was going through something again with my parents and they were, yeah, and now literally failing school at that point. Was not doing well and church was all sorts of other kinds of bullying. Um, and then cast aside. [Long pause.] I wasn't considering suicide, but my friend asked me, "Are you considering suicide?" "No. I'm not." And he had been working for a suicide hotline as a volunteer, so I think he took upon himself to reach out to me. And then I realized, "Oh, there are people who do, who are mindful of this, have resources."

Geordi shared that, since then, he has helped others struggling with suicide, and he openly speaks about his experience with youth and college students.

Deanna recalled both the death of her youth group friend to suicide and observing her parents respond pastorally to suicide as important encounters. She described being on track to be a librarian, but then she experienced an internal conflict:

> Uh, uncannily enough, one of my youth group friends, well, she, we went on like mission trips together. She had completed suicide and so that was like a really kind of a shocking

> thing for me. Then my auntie passed away from cancer and, and then, like, just the whole college experience was, like, I felt so selfish. Kind of like my only, my only job is to like better myself, learn, you know just learn and get good grades, try to get good grades. And so, you know, my meals are taken care of, somebody cleans the bathroom in the dorms, you know, that was a little . . . it's . . . started to get to me.

Deanna's verbal usage of "completed suicide" to refer to someone who died of suicide informed me that she was knowledgeable about the power in language and aware of the harm the word *committed* can do. After graduating from college, Deanna lived in an "intentional community" and worked as a volunteer for seniors with dementia and developmental disabilities. She exclaimed, "That's where I heard my call to ministry. God was like [rolling eyes], 'OK, OK.' And then, yeah . . . found school of religion, went there right after my volunteer work was over, and graduated and then was appointed here."

William's encounter with suicide was during his early years in ministry. As a pastor in a rural area, he found that his role involved not just evangelizing but also being a leader of the community who can help others, including the elderly. In Korean, he said, "You know those ling-ghel shots? IV drips. They asked me to insert them. So I would administer that for them too."[4] He also provided funeral services for the community when needed. A community member once sought his counsel about an unfair dispute he had over a car accident. Talking about this man, he shared in English,

> When I was in Korea, I served a local church for seven years in kind of agricultural area. Actually, he's not a church member. Only his daughter and son attended my church. But one day the farmer guy took suicide so, so it was very shock for me because before he took suicide, he visited my home to discuss his situation. So, I met him around the one hour and then encouraged him. But later day, after that day, he took a suicide [nervous smile].

William's understanding of the young father who "took suicide" was that the father was unable to see a way out of his situation. As a farmer, he couldn't hire a fancy lawyer to take on a

[4] This is a translation of the following: "심지어는 링겔 주사 있죠? 물약. 그거 놔 달라고 해요. 그럼 그것도 놔 드리고."

reputable taxi company, so he felt his only option was death. Talking about how the rumors floated around the day after the farmer was found dead in a plastic greenhouse after consuming pesticides, William shared, "Since he died from drinking pesticides, in Korean society, they think of shame, and the family didn't want to stay and wanted to leave the village as soon as possible … nothing else."

William's encounter with suicide impacted him in a way that shaped his approach to ministry and his role as an immigrant Asian American pastor. He believed that as long as there is a "competition mentality" in the Asian community, suicide will be an inevitable, natural outcome. While he hasn't acted to change this pattern of suicide in his community, his thinking about suicide did change after his encounter with it:

> It meant that he was desperate, since he isn't joking around, right? And then you think about all kinds of options, whether to do this or that, and once your thinking is driven toward something there's no turning back, there's no space to think about turning around. And so, why that is, for example, if someone were to corner me and drive me to the edge of the cliff, either I can fight the person who is driving me to the edge or jump, and those who don't think they can, they can't even think about fighting back. So they jump. When situation becomes like that and there's no flexibility in one's thinking, isn't that when they decide to die. As I think this, as a pastor I want my church members to have an outlook on life that's not one sided, I think it's really important in ministry.

The role that William has taken on as a result of this encounter is to give people "IV" drips" as a preventative measure. In essence, the IV drips symbolize the nutrients and the hopeful messages one needs from completely depleting one's health. His message is for people is to not think life is only about one thing, nor do they think that one thing is the only important thing in the world.

William shared a second "shocking" encounter he had, which made him realize that he lived a very "narrow-minded" life. A retired psychiatrist lecturing on mental illness at his church shifted his understanding of suicide and mental illness: What he said was, "Don't worry too

much and consider taking medication." Meaning, mental illness, ultimately, it's an illness. Mental illness, in all, it's like, through things like that, even the thought of wanting to "suicide," that mind . . . What that doctor said was, in today's time, if you take appropriate medication at the right time, you won't even think about wanting to die.

Interviewer: What was your response?

> So, great, better than me, I thought. He stated so simply. . . . We say, you need to pray, you need to win, you should do this – we say things like this often, you know? But he was like said it so simply, I think it'll be good to take this medication first – since you need prescription. And people know this, and even people who can't sleep, because they can't sleep because they can't fall asleep. I could've never thought about it (laughs). My life seemed too narrow (I feel like I lived a narrow life). When I can't fall I asleep, I'm going to Costco thinking what medicine should I take, like hearing from somewhere or something like that you know? I never thought to seek a mental health specialist because I can't fall asleep. But others, they already know this stuff and many are taking medication. But then there are some that are addictive and if the doctor thinks it might make it worse, then the doctor wouldn't prescribe it for them, anyway he was saying of course but then there needs to a lot of solutions but in this modern society, to think of taking medication as a positive thing – So I did learn about that one.

William took note of this learning from the medical point of view that mental illness is a disease and that it is treatable; one can treat it through the help of a doctor like a psychiatrist. He believed medication can help provide the person at risk with time to work through their issues or concerns. However, he also acknowledged that within that time, some pastoral care would be suitable for the person: "In the meantime, I suppose one could get to the fundamental core with some direction in religious life."[5] This encounter with suicide helped William to understand mental illness in a new light, but he still believes that seeking a solution through faith and getting to the core of a person's issue would be beneficial.

Guinan, who grew up in Korea and followed her husband to the US for his seminary education, shared the taint of shame she experienced when she felt suicidal:

[5] Translation: "그 사이에 좀 더 근본적인 부분이나 그런것을 신앙속에서 해결하는 길을 모색하던지."

> For me, only now I'm thinking is, as a youth, I had some moments, some shame. There was a very difficult, but not probably strong enough to take away my life. When I had some point, yeah, I wanted to take away my life. I sound like something happened, and I felt very shameful the time that I wanted to disappear but, but not the way [of] suicide, because my understanding was that would be sin.

In reflection, Guinan thought that the teachings of the church on suicide as sin led to her feelings of shame. She notes how helpful it would have been if her Sunday school teachers had not only taught that committing suicide is a sin but also had shared stories about suicide from the perspectives of others: "Because I feel like my understanding and myself was kind of very narrowed Christian. I have to say, because it's very much black and white, there is no other colors." While she continues to explore the complexity of suicide and sin, she also has lingering thoughts and feelings of shame embedded in her from an early age:

> I used to feel suicide as not really shameful, at a young age even. I always felt it's kind of a choice, people can make it, but the church taught, taught me, and my peers, because you receive your body and life from your parents and God, you don't have, you don't have right to harm yourself, because you are representing your family or church. But not so much. There was always embedded [pause], maybe still? And not so much as I experience God's grace, it's not so much. I think as I grew up, I had more compassion and empathy on the person who go through a lot. And also the family, how they suffer, even though someone really just didn't happen to make final decision, but attempting – how painful. Those process. I have more empathy and compassion and I still think I can learn about how to engage people and show my compassion. That's where, what I'm more interested in.

Almost all of the participants began their journey of understanding suicide by being taught that suicide is sinful. The only exception was Deanna, who did not grow up learning that suicide is a sin. She noted that she grew up in a household with parents who were district superintendents of the United Methodist Church (thus ministers) and who were "very open-minded and progressive parents." They showed her a compassionate stance toward those who die of suicide:

> I honestly can't recall it ever been spoken about when I was growing up. I do remember hearing about my mom providing pastoral care to the son of the congregational members

> who was contemplating suicide, and so, just like hearing kind of her process, and I'm sorry, I can't really remember the details of that, but that's kind of like my first memory of suicide.

Deanna's encounter was a passive suicide observation, but she still learned how the ministry of care is approached. Innately, she can take on this role of a compassionate pastor responding with compassion to suicide. She knows through the modeling of her parents reacting to a suicide crisis how she, too, can approach those who struggle with suicide. Learning occurs through encounters like these, which provide one way to respond pastorally to suicide without stigma, judgment, or condemnation.

Deanna frequently encounters suicide and builds upon her previous knowledge about suicide through ongoing encounters with members of her church who serve voluntarily and actively as suicide survivor advocates on mental health and reducing the stigma of suicide. These members actively sought out Deanna when they first arrived at her church:

> Oh well, when, when I first got here, they were really instrumental in connecting me with the Executive Director of Mental Health, America. Like, they're good friends with her, and so they're like, "You need to meet her." And so, you know, I can't even remember what the meeting was about, frank, to be honest. It was so long ago. We, like, but she invited us to her house, and we had a really, like, it was a very connecting and educational meeting, and just like educating me, right, making me aware of issues. And then, from time to time, they'll write a little newsletter article and say, "Could you please put this in the newsletter?" And so I am mindful of that. I don't ever ignore it; we always do commemorate it in some way during worship.

Additionally, Deanna has learned some of the unhelpful and harmful statements people say about suicide. The encounter with a suicide loss survivor helped Deanna see the spectrum of differing views on suicide, expanding her horizon of understanding. She described the hurtful statements as having an adverse taste; they are "gross lies."

> I was kind of just like amazed by some of the things that [A] shared about, like, with her child, with mental illness, you know, um, how, like, God's not going to love you because you're like that, you're never going to get to heaven, you're possessed by the devil – all of these really gross lies and then you know how one lie leads to another and then the

person who's struggling believes all that crap. So those are I guess the messages that I've heard that [A] shared. I've never experienced that personally but…

Deanna regularly has beneficial encounters with suicide through her connection with the active advocates for suicide survivors and mental health in her congregation. These encounters continue to add meaning and complexity to the breadth of her understanding in her pastoral caregiving.

In summary, the first theme points to importance of each encounter and the experience that follow that leave an impression or an imprint on one's life experiences. It also points to how sacred each encounter can be in expanding our usual understanding of suicide. Moreover, it shows how frequent these encounters can be – and although people may have repeated encounters, it isn't known to most people. Implication of this theme is that there are as many opportunities to learn something, have an experience, observe, and see something different simply from an encounter with suicide.

Another implication of this theme is that "encounters" can be healing and it can be unhelpful. Depending on how encounter was experienced, it can have a positive outcome or a hurtful, harmful impact without our conscious knowing. It can also be an opening of space where healing or transformation can take place because it's a mark – it's an encounter that sparks the electricity to go in the direction that it will. Understanding this theme can be a helpful launching point at which one can be trained or learned to begin making sense on their own. For healing and meaning-making especially in spiritual care, one can pay particular attention to our immediate reactions and feelings. Are there discrepancies, friction, conflict internally happening? It can be named to identify one's own assumptions and biases. We cannot minimize the power of encounters that are molding and actively shaping our communal or collective understanding of whatever that is. I reckon there are encounter stories to be told.

Developing Theological Imagination

Similar to the first theme, the second theme that emerged in my participants' understandings of suicide revolved around their embedded or deliberate theologies informed by their suicide encounters and by family members, religious institutions, and teachings that had shaped their views and perspectives on suicide and their views of God. Embedded theologies are modalities of thinking shaped by narratives that have reinforced our thoughts and spiritual practices. Our embedded theologies reveal themselves in how we cope with crises. They are often formed in childhood and continue to function in the adult years, mostly without our awareness of them. These early-formed beliefs generally surface when a crisis or a disruption in life beckons one to ask questions about one's beliefs, values, and practices. Thus, as Doehring writes, "Stress-related feelings of fear, shame, and guilt pull together values, beliefs, and ways of coping embodied in life-limiting theologies formed by systems of social oppression."[6]

Embedded theologies may be anywhere on a spectrum from healthy to unhealthy. An embedded theology doesn't necessarily have to be deconstructed—even when it's unhealthy, it can serve as a protective factor. For example, an embedded belief that suicide is a sin may serve as a protective factor in preventing one from taking one's life if one's fear of condemnation stops one from engaging in the act. At the same time, I would argue that there are more helpful theological beliefs that can serve as positive protective factors. In short, I advocate not fear but love in a form that is actualized, understood, and embodied as an important factor in deterring one from taking one's life. The embedded beliefs and values that frame death by suicide as morally wrong can also lead people to believe that those who die by suicide are weak, abnormal, irresponsible, irrational, and lacking in faith. This leads to further stigmatization and over-

[6] Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care*, xxi.

simplifies how we understand suicide. Such a belief strengthens our dichotomous narratives of right and wrong, good and evil, and it casts a stroke of judgment, shame, and helplessness on those impacted by suicide. There are no gray areas in this kind of rigid thinking, leaving little room to process suicide compassionately. Doehring's examination of embedded theologies shows how the unexamined, everyday use of words passed down in our cultures and Christian communities can be reinforced and then ritually used, forming collective beliefs that hinder people during times of suffering.

My participants' theological perspectives on suicide varied, and most of them held a mixture of views on suicide that encompassed their embedded theology and their working theology, along with an openness to questioning previous understandings and exploring other perspectives. I envision this second theme as an open-ended sphere that is a fruitful place in which to question and ask questions. The participants' theologies of suicide were often deliberate or intentional theologies, which continue to change and evolve in their role as pastors. Constructing these deliberate theologies is different from simply encountering suicide. Although anyone can have a direct encounter with suicide, not everyone recognizes their embedded theology regarding suicide and deconstructs its meaning, moving from the experience of the event to an intentional theology.

Participants in this study all exhibited a working theology about suicide that required some form of wrestling with and questioning of their previously embedded theology on suicide. Along with suicide, themes of eschatology, forgiveness, grace, and sin frequently surfaced, giving depth and meaning to the experience of suicide, humanizing those who have died by suicide, and destigmatizing suicide. Unlike many Asian American studies on pastors who report holding conservative theologies about suicide, most of my research participants had an open and

inclusive theology that advocated standing in solidarity with the deceased. I credit this difference to having been born in the US or lived in the US longer than pastors in other studies. In addition to being perhaps more acculturated, the younger ages of my participants may also account for the difference.

The participants also expressed conflicting ideas in their theological beliefs about suicide. Almost all of them held a compassionate view for the afflicted, empathizing with the suicide victim and the suicide loss survivors. At the same time, none of the participants could assert what happens to the soul of a person who takes their own life. Many of them noted that their theology regarding suicide was a "working theology." Although several had a particular view on suicide, not all of them had actively pondered what their theology on suicide might be. Instead, they remained open to new ideas and some left ultimate matters in the care of God. Wesley, who was one of the team members who worked on the wording regarding suicide for the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church, expressed this theological open-endedness in his reflections:

> I feel like there's, still leaves room for interpretation and then it leaves room for both; well, it's more towards the care, right? It doesn't talk necessarily about the theology of, like the reasons behind it, but talks about care, death by suicide. I don't think we did the theological work, right? Like the care is part of it, but if we're not teaching folks how to understand, it's too easy to be reactive to; if suicide happens, we're going to care for people as opposed to, like, how do we, how do we, I mean, it's all over, like, how do we prevent white nationalists from teaching, right? How do we prevent people of, what's it called, abortion, anti-abortionist people, right, looking at one meant, like, this is the one thing, right? That's penalty! Gone, etcetera. So I mean, I think it's in that same line, oh, they, just, it's lazy.

Wesley then shared his understanding of suicide by stating,

> I think as Christians in Western world, especially to Western culture, especially to think about sinner's suicide. So I just know that something that I had carried with me as in my upbringing somewhere. I don't know where, but somewhere. I don't understand suicide to be sin. I don't actually have a strong sense of heaven and hell either, so that, that there is not really a big part of my own theology or eschatology or what not. I just don't, that's not the issue I wrestle with most deeply or frankly care about. I take it back. I do care about it, it's just not as much.

Wesley commented that suicide and the Bible need to be understood contextually, acknowledging how science has advanced our learning of how humans respond to stress mentally and physically. When looking at suicide from a cultural perspective, he noted that suicide is one way humans respond to the external and internal battles we experience in life: "It's how we as human beings carry the burdens that we have from society or even internally, those that we've internalized from our parents or from our culture, even how we carry those with us, which then we'd respond in various ways, some by choice and some not." Therefore, Wesley believes that suicide should not be viewed as a crime, and he has come to understand how language has the power to shape and culturally influence how we understand suicide. He shared how his perspectives influenced his response to a youth's suicide in his church:

> We talked about, with the youth, how life, from beginning to whenever it ends. We all have an end to life. Sometimes it's in our control. Other times it's not. Sometimes it's old age, other times it's by car accident, or anything else, right? All these are, and then suicide is one of those ways that ends life. And so we always grieve the end of life, but we don't question the ways that God comforts and carries us from life into life after. So I think that that transition piece is one that, you know, I claim I don't understand.

Holding and embracing *both* an understanding of some aspects of suicide and death *and* a lack of understanding of other aspects allows Wesley to hold the known and the unknown with an open mind. It is notable that, out of this place of uncertainty, he destigmatizes suicide and continues to use preferred language about suicide, both of which transmit to others his position on suicide.

Similarly, right from the beginning Deanna used terms such as "completed suicide" and "death by suicide" to express her nonjudgmental stance on suicide, which was demonstrated throughout her interview. Additionally, she noted, "We can't talk about suicide without talking about mental health issues and mental illness," and, like William, she asserted that it is helpful to understand mental illness as a medical disease. She imagines churches can

> offer space and offer support groups, if that's helpful. I think it's so important to acknowledge, you know, the pain of loss and the pain of, is that it's okay to say the pain of surviving, the pain that comes with that loss. While they continue, I don't know [pause], I just think we just need to say it's okay. We embrace you and we don't judge your loved one either. That's so important. Maybe this is a cop-out answer, but I would say, God loves each one of us unconditionally regardless of what we do and what we do not do, you know. God does not condemn us and God is a God of grace, so, I mean, I have, I have trouble with the doctrine of hell, period, to be quite honest. But I don't believe that anyone would go to hell because they completed suicide. No. No.

Guinan, the only participant from a non-Christian family, recognized that she comes from a very conservative Christian background. At age seven, she was given a specific message about suicide by her church:

> So in my Christian culture, as a younger child in South Korea, I was raised hearing suicide is a sin, because God gives all the life as a gift and take away the gift is a sin. And so, whenever I witnessed any suicide in my hometown where, like hearing from someplace else, I always felt like somebody is committing sin to himself and to family. That's how I understood suicide until I would say maybe college. . . . But the culture I grew up is like, pastors and churches whose teachers was, really tried to make sure that I understood suicide will be sin.

As shown earlier, Guinan experienced shame when she felt suicidal at one time in her life, and she believes that maybe she still holds some of the embedded thinking from her childhood. She understands the harm shame does, and she tells herself that she needs a lot of grace. After transplanting her life from Korea to the US, a shift took place in her thinking as she did deconstructive work on her theology about subjects she had previously regarded as sinful. Guinan, who was the participant most unsure about her shifting theology on suicide, noted,

> I don't want to do my experience, my knowledge, my way or reaction not become weaponized or just attack, no. That would be horrible. So, so many things that I thought about, believed as sin is not sin. There was for me personally eye-opening; whatever I believed was sin was not sin. To me, like even small thing. I don't know if it's a good example, but even divorce, that I learned and I believe was sin, but here now, I'm like, well, what if, yeah? This so much to do with the culture.

Guinan recognized how Christian teachings operating through a cultural lens had impacted her worldview significantly: "I know that how church and our theology has harmed so many people

in the way we believe and kind of judgmental. The church taught me wrong." Talking about her understanding of suicide, she shared,

> So, to me, suicide, understanding of suicide then, it's not seeing and it's, they are not dying in hell. It's, no, that, you know, we don't know, right? We don't know, right? So, to me, it's more likely opening now, like oh, what I believe was like, it betrayed or like I was tricked. I don't have that feeling, but I am more likely now that I opening, how could I integrate it, what if I feel what I learned to offer some people don't have it right? It's not easy.

Guinan then articulated the harm that Western Christian values brought by missionaries to Korea did to Korean Christians' understandings of our values and our ways of relating to one another:

> To me it seems Christians, they love to correct somebody else, or if you share something wrong, your church, I think people are not just listening. They try to provide the, like, way to resolve or like, yeah, correct in the church because if we are taught, or so church has to lead the culture, right? I think something embedded within us Christians that we have to lead, we have to take people to another place, a better place. Right, like, so suicide survivors, they don't need that leading but what they really need is companionship, right, so that's why I'm, church itself make not comfortable to share things. You think about how they know that they're trying to take me to a better place. They're not like companionship but like leaders. That's my initial thought. I think something in our, in kind of Christian culture, there's something embedded, that's kind of why I would say, "You know in Christian history too, whenever they kind of went to another continent, okay? They always think their culture is low so they have to bring them over, they have to help them, you know, improve their life, civilized, whatever." They were not companions. The church is always trying better, trying to fix it, right, fix it. Mentality of Christians. That's my processing personally to, it's okay, not to be okay. That's what I, you know, recently, processing that. So, it's okay not to be okay, yeah.

Guinan expressed her sorrow that people are unable "to hold space wide enough to hold other beliefs, or other speculations or other perspectives that might counter—it's not so simple. It's not so black and white." She stated the value of providing a space where people can simply be without having to be indoctrinated with messages of what to believe it and what not to believe in. Guinan has moved from having beliefs about suicide as a sin that should be punished, to where she is at now, believing that, at the very least, pastors can offer a space for people to raise questions about this punitive God.

For Geordi, his theological understanding of suicide was a "working theology," but he drew from his personal experience for his thinking:

> [Suicide] comes from a sense of despair and not being able to see a future of relief for healing and even if there were, the weight of sacrifice of it will be too overbearing. And I tend to see that a heart of compassion was helpful for me. That's the reason why I stayed in this denomination, is because of our stance on suicide. And even assisted suicide and end of life that we understand that there are many more complex things and God mourns that suffering that happens. And end one's life is not the end all be all. There's much more beyond that, that we're not for judgment, but to care and compassion… I can only imagine that the weight and cost of hell has already been experienced on this earth. That they must have been experiencing hell so far here and even with the light and joy that you have shared, appreciate they've had a hell, that they had to carry that. [I] would think that God would have more compassion to carry them differently. But I'm not the judge at the end, but I believe in a compassionate caring, loving God first. That's how I approach it.

Geordi's personal experience of suicide gives him the insight to know that God is ready to care, not judge. Like Wesley, he does not claim to know what God will ultimately do, but his understanding leads him to say that he believes primarily in a loving God. Unlike what he hears from evangelical churches, whose voices are sustained because of the "confidence in those answers," he feels that

> those of us who have Masters of Divinity or study this to a theological point, not just reading the books, just for the fun of it, but really wrestled deeply and academically beyond experiential, we've said there's so much more, the unknown. (pause) The rest of us are on the in-between, and suicide, the contemplation of its place in that space of in between. And we need more spaces to allow that to be okay, but they're definitely not as popular.

Embedded in Geordi's thinking is the idea that there is more to life than what we perceive when we simply look at it in black-and-white terms. Like Guinan and Deanna, Geordi noted the need to create more spaces where people can be themselves, question, and be okay with the unknown. But because the message of condemnation is "so strong and prevalent that their sense of grace isn't big enough in those spaces quite yet to open for other conversation," the call for more spaces where people can share openly is not being acted on.

Taking into account his context, William shared that, rather than focusing on the afterlife—which he assumes many Asian Americans are more curious about—his role as a pastor is to console the families of suicide survivors.

> We Christians say, "So-and-so is saved. So-and-so went to heaven." We say these things quite often, right? But that in itself is human arrogance. Who gets to go to heaven and who doesn't is God's business. It's none of our business. Of course, the children would want to hear that their parents went to heaven. But from a third person's perspective, I think that's not it. I don't think you should say it like that. If I were in a situation where I had to give some kind of message, I wouldn't necessarily focus on the issue of suicide but focus [on] meeting them in their grief. Of course, the family survivors will want to hear through a pastor's mouth that even through suicide, their loved one went to heaven, since arm bends inward equals "since skin is nearer than the shirt." But if you start going in that direction, there will be much to handle, and that can be a bit much, and it's not everything, so . . . I think saying, "We pray that God will take care of that person's soul," I think is the truth and other than that, to be with them in their grief, and think how I would offer hope to people.

William reflected on his embedded theology about salvation and determined that answering, "They're saved," would be a simplistic answer in the face of a death by suicide, and it would not be representative of God's focus during the untimely death of an Asian American. It is worthy to note that William's encounters with suicide and other opportunities to learn about mental health had given him a framework of helping people move out of engaging in either-or-thinking and toward thinking, as he said, "If not A, then B perhaps." He, too, holds and embraces alternative ways of understanding of suicide that informs his ministry.

While Asian American pastors did not feel empowered to speak to first-generation Asian American adults about issues of mental health and suicide, they did feel they could talk about these matters with younger children, youth, and second-, third-, and fourth-generation Asian Americans. Wesley shared,

> Strangely, I think our youth are more equipped to talk about it than our parents are, and I don't know about the Korean context. I think that our generation and below, we've been at the start of the conversation about destigmatizing mental health. And so, like, the generation above us, a couple, like even the harmonies (grandmas), right, they all, like,

> they have a very clear understanding of what their faith is, and it's like, it's this. But I think, you know, as we kind of navigate, ours and maybe a little bit above us, because they're having kids. But like, for our generations that are having these conversations a little bit more regular, like we talk about in school, we talk about it and like, you know, we talk about mental health and mental illness, like in youth group, and I'm starting to try to not often and not directly, but how do we talk about mental health in, on Sunday morning, or mental health, you know, support groups and things like that, right. So I think that surprisingly our youth are better equipped to handle this kind of a situation than maybe some of our older generations are.

Other participants shared similar thoughts. Guinan said, "I think younger generation is more open. And older generation is opposite. So I noticed in myself that I'm open sharing with young generation. I have meeting with youth leaders or children's ministry. I see them, and with children, not so much." According to Geordi, "The sense of shame and talking about the stigma of it, that will make older generation still uncomfortable, but the younger generations are feeling like, more free, as they are finding the American culture be more public about their issues, shamelessly, sometimes a little TMI [too much information]."

Many of the participants echoed parts of the literature that note that mental health beliefs and stigmatization have a generational impact that taints following generations with the embedded values of prior generations. However, since these participants were younger and possibly more Americanized, they seemed to feel free to share their theologies about suicide with younger generations without worrying how their open theologies or working theologies might negatively impact their ministry or role as a pastor. Nor did they express a sense of shame (for not knowing all the answers) or doubt regarding their pastoral authority. Their role as a pastor remains intact. The participants congruently shared the ease of speaking with younger generations about so-called difficult topics in Asian communities and the positive receptivity of younger people. However, older Asian Americans may expect their Asian American pastors to know all the answers and be knowledgeable about theology. The participants' theologies—which

are in the process of being worked out or are inclusive theologies that steer away from traditional theologies—may stir up anxiety or emotions in their congregants that can negatively impact their role as pastor.

As previously noted, most of my participants had a compassionate stance toward those directly impacted by suicide, which included questioning the more well-known understanding of suicide as sin and completely nullifying the existence of hell. Aside from their range of beliefs and thoughts on suicide, the participants spoke of hearing suicide portrayed in a judgmental and shameful way, primarily through passive and active suicide encounters as well as through how their communities responded to cases of suicide. My suspicion that harmful statements about suicide are still common and frequent, even in this day and age, was confirmed. Most of my research participants had picked up from somewhere or someone statements on suicide such as the following: "Suicide is a sin." "Those who die by suicide are condemned to hell." "Those who commit suicide can't be forgiven." "You're possessed by the devil if you take your own life." These types of statements or teachings had informed the pastors' understandings of suicide. Whether or not the participants agreed with any of these statements, they all expressed that the assumed theology in Asian American communities and churches regarding suicide is a harsh one that holds suicide is a sin and, since it is a sin, someone who dies by suicide is condemned to hell. In addition, anyone who takes their own life brings shame on and inflicts a burden on their family and community.

Several important implications arise from this theme. First, as evidenced by participants' words that their deliberative theology "doesn't erase or negate embedded theologies of suicide; they co-exist," many Asian American pastors are open to expanding their understandings of suicide and mental health. My participants were clear about what their embedded theologies

were and how they had shifted their understandings; for example, Guinan was taught one way of thinking, but through deconstruction and suicide encounters, she has been able to identify the complexity of the issue of suicide and widen her previous understanding. However, the participants' mixed theologies also discouraged them from talking with other people about their ideas, where they could develop them in a community of support; rather, most worked out their theologies internally on their own. Their ambiguity may lead them to avoid addressing suicide in their congregations, since their theologies are still in the process of being worked out. This situation of tension and conflict not only identifies a rich, fertile place to wrestle with theology, but also the potential to integrate experience in a way that is more open-ended. Discussing theology in a supportive environment can be expansively transformative. Providing supportive environments to raise questions and discuss ideas may be an effective educational strategy to help congregants hear their pastor's or other pastors' views on suicide. The liminal space of holding an ambiguous theology is a potentially life-changing context for shifting one's perspectives on suicide, God, or other theological matters. It is a place where one is more open to exploring different perspectives and views on any subject matter. The place of theological uncertainty or confusion can be a resource in spiritual care because it provides an opportunity to identify and examine embedded theologies or beliefs. Through exploration, deeper understandings of particular issues can develop that perhaps better describe or explain certain experiences. Theological tension can lead to growth that helps people challenge and change harmful or stigmatizing beliefs and practices surrounding suicide.

Filtering Pastoral Authority through a Cultural Lens

I have pointed out that Asian pastors are not simply pastoral leaders. Their role encompasses many functions, such as interpreter, legal consultant, and counselor. In other words,

pastors are helpers and are expected to be helpful. Asian cultures inform people's expectations, which then determine what pastors can do and say and still maintain their authority as pastors. Conversely, pastors are supposed to have authority, but the type of authority they have or how they practice and express that authority is determined by cultural expectations. Interestingly, pastoral authority also intersects with acting out the role of the "good" Asian American, which my participants did to live out their identities as Asian Americans in the contexts of Asian American congregations.

Pastors are employed by a church to fulfill their call and duty as ordained ministers in their parishes. In the United Methodist denomination, pastors are "appointed" by a religious leader, usually a bishop, who is an employee of the religious institution. Among the usual job description duties of preaching, administration, and ordering of the church, a pastor's role as an Asian American religious leader in an Asian American Christian setting also entails living out "the mission of the Church," which "is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."[7] As the head of the religious household, a pastor naturally bears the burden and the responsibility of taking care of the wellness of the congregation, not only spiritually, but in other areas of concern, in both direct and indirect ways. A pastor provides a ministry of presence with the lost, confused, and suffering as a steady and grounded figure who can be relied on for guidance and comfort. Pastors represent and provide hope. Sometimes the pastor becomes a role model. At a minimum, pastors are expected to be and are perceived by congregants to be representations or extensions of themselves. In addition, as an immigrant Asian American pastor, William noted that his role as a pastor includes helping the members of his congregation expand their ways of adjusting to new settings, that is, "to help people who immigrate here to not live by

[7] *Book of Discipline*, ¶120.

thinking in too Korean ways, but help them expand their views through their spiritual life."[8] He takes on the role of helping new immigrants learn to change their practices and ideas to ones that will aid them in adjusting to their current context and maintain their health and wellness.

Asian American pastors want to be good pastors, ones who are understanding and conscientious of cultural values, which shows that they understand themselves specifically in this cultural way. As "appointed" pastors, good pastors do not want to "disappoint" their congregations or communities. Thus, Asian American pastors feel they must filter their practice of pastoral authority through a cultural lens. In other words, cultural norms influence the authority a pastor has or how much power a pastor can exercise as a pastor. A pastor's authority operates through adhering to and understanding the cultural norms of a congregation. *Cultural norms* can refer to the unique culture of a particular church, but here I am using the term to refer to the Asian culture that is usually found within East Asian groups. Asian American pastors' authority is often limited to or tied to the cultural expectations of their congregation.

In Asian congregations, Asian American pastors must live up to the ideals associated with being a "good" pastor. Within the Asian cultural perspective, *good* is often equated with concepts of orderliness, harmony, peace, calm, and composure. On the other hand, *bad* refers to discord, tension, emotionalism, irresponsibility, chaos, and being unconventional. Thus, in order to be "good" pastors, Asian American pastors may feel they must restrain themselves from fully expressing their stances—whether this means simply speaking freely or speaking against the norm—in order to maintain the harmony of the collective, that is, for the greater good. For Asian American pastors, speaking against the grain can directly affect their position as a pastor, their ministry, and the entire church. It can be risky and challenging to step outside of what is socially

[8] This is a translation of the following: "이민온 사람들에게 너무 한국적인 생각으로 살지 않겠금 신앙을 통해서 넓혀줘야 생각한다."

and culturally acceptable. Guinan described the church as a "crazy web" where one leader's mistake can trickle down, causing stress and tension for everyone. Thus, the participants in my study were always hyper-aware of where they stood in their relationship with their parishes.

Regardless of their deliberate or working theologies on suicide, the Asian American pastors in this study were all conscientious about acting in culturally appropriate and sensitive manners with their congregants by building upon knowledge gained from previous experiences. Their pastoral authority was filtered through a cultural lens, which can simultaneously be empowering and disempowering. My findings revealed that my participants' ways of exercising their pastoral authority were most prominently informed and influenced by their congregations, and what they did was always weighed against or in conjunction with what was socially acceptable. In other words, a pastor's ministerial work was constrained or shaped by the cultural norms and expectations of that person's congregation. This means that sometimes, the participants' pastoral authority came at the expense of their personal desires.

Asian cultural norms and values are derived from Confucian teachings and include such concepts as filial piety, saving face, and avoiding shame. To act in culturally appropriate ways, as expected by their Asian American congregations, Asian American pastors must conform to Confucian-influenced norms. To behave in a culturally nonconforming way toward a person or congregation looking through this cultural lens can put unwanted tension between the two parties. As Asian American pastors who were already sensitive to cultural patterns such as shame operating in Asian communities, my participants were intentional about interacting with their congregants in a culturally appropriate manner. Pastors do not want to upset their congregations, so the restraints of Confucian cultural norms significantly impacted my participants' agency to respond to the silence surrounding suicide in their settings.

If a pastor acts against cultural norms, the congregation's pushback against the pastor can lead the pastor to take measures to make sure that the congregation is content again. Thus, Asian American pastors feel they do not have the power to step outside cultural norms and are powerless in the face of their congregations' intolerance for deviating from cultural norms. In my study, if his or her church had a strong adherence to Confucian teachings, the participant was careful to respond pastorally in ways that reflected values close to Confucian teachings. Disregarding the congregation's value placed on cultural norms and expectations means an Asian American pastor may lose the approval of his or her congregation. Additionally, since Asians prefer engaging in indirect forms of communication as opposed to assertiveness and direct communication, it is easy for misunderstandings to occur between parties with two very different sets of assumptions about power.

In the more Americanized settings of second- and third-generation Asian Americans, the expectations placed on participants to adhere to Asian cultural norms were low. But the experience one Asian American pastor had was that she did not feel she could openly talk about suicide, even in these contexts: "I don't know that I know anybody in the congregation besides [X] who has a family member who has completed suicide. And so I wouldn't want them to feel singled out like, 'Oh, we're gonna talk about suicide in this.' You know I, I would want to feel sensitive about a spotlight." This pastor filtered possible actions through a cultural lens and determined she should not risk placing any focus on a particular family. Similarly, she thinks through what might be appropriate to preach from the pulpit, filtering out anything that might be considered culturally inappropriate. Understanding the culture of her church, where people's views are very diverse—"more than meets the eye, theologically and politically"—she is constantly attempting to talk creatively about emotionally charged topics:

> That's always been kind of a place of tension, I guess. Like, "Don't talk about politics in the pulpit!" But it's like, well, you know, Jesus cared about people. Jesus was a political figure. So always trying to think creatively about how to talk about or, you know, lift up communities in a way that's not threatening. But yeah, because we're in "Bible Belt of the West . . ."

The Asian American pastors in this study were careful to behave pastorally through the cultural lenses of their congregations, ministering in culturally nuanced ways. Engaging in unexpected or unusual behaviors, including certain forms of nonverbal communication, can cause misunderstandings, hurt, festering anger, and disappointment. William shared his vulnerability as a pastor counseling an Asian couple experiencing marital discord:

> I've experienced it too. You sure this is confidential? There was a couple that started coming to church regularly. They asked us to come over to their house and started talking. Separately, I listened to the husband's side and my wife listened to the wife, and rather than facts, it was closer to anxiety and paranoia. But it wasn't getting solved. But then after spilling everything out, we haven't changed, but you know, as they're family doctor and outside people say, "doctor, doctor"—these are well-respected people, but after spilling out everything, they were, they felt shameful. On one Wednesday evening Bible study, I asked a question. The wife of the couple answered. You know I smile often—Sermon or Bible study, I smile, and that's how I responded, with a smile. Later that evening a call came, "Pastor, you were mocking me today, weren't you?" When I asked, "Why are you saying this?" "Who do you think you are to answer that way. And did you not laugh?" So I said, "I had no such thought," and she then said, "Then, fine," and hung up. . . . But ever since, within a year, that person's attitude keeps changing, one by one.

A misunderstanding of cultural cues that could have happened to anyone suddenly became a concern that jeopardized William's ministry and his role as a pastor. In response, he enacted an approach to the church where I suspect he no longer engages in couples' counseling or shows his vulnerability. The cultural mishap between two Asian American parties with two very different assumptions about power is ultimately something for William to work through. For William, it is easier to navigate his ministry by filtering his actions through a cultural lens, sticking to familiar cultural norms and traditions, than to engage in unconventional behavior, such as making himself

available to counsel a couple. The cost of having an uncomfortable relationship with this couple for the past few years has not seemed worthwhile to repeat for William.

After recounting the bad experience with the couple he tried to counsel, William spoke clearly of the expectations he shares during his congregation's welcoming class:

> So, this is what I say now. When newcomers come, once a month they will meet their small groups and we share how you can have a healthy spiritual life, and I always state this: "If after sharing something personal and later you feel burdened or feel conscious about what you shared, then don't share so abruptly. Don't even tell me as pastor and not to a church member. Some people have a personality of just spilling it all out. . . . Rather, just say, 'I'm worried about this.' Then we can say, 'We'll be praying hard for you. Don't you know that God knows your heart.' So don't share on a whim and then feel hurt after sharing everything and close yourself, so that you don't feel like you have to leave the church." I say this up front. In big churches, where they have a separate department to receive pastoral care, they encourage members to go there. Of course, they can't be selfish. If you do that, then, to pastors, or at least it won't be exposed this way, so one can have a longer, healthier spiritual life. I think that's the reality.

This approach to ministry was informed by the negative experience William had with the woman who received couple's counseling. To protect new members from possibly misunderstanding William's intent, which can lead to adverse experiences in a collective, he deliberately enters into a space and speaks authoritatively about thinking carefully about what to share and what not to share in order to have a healthy, faithful life in the church community. As a pastor, he sets a clear tone and the parameters for discerning what is allowed and what might be better not to share. He protects his congregation and himself from unfortunate circumstances in the future by setting boundaries. Of course, William has in mind that he would prefer that members take personal issues to a more appropriate person, like a counselor or a psychiatrist. However, the luxury of pastors and congregations having a separate counseling department that works in conjunction with the church is rare and an option that is not possible for the majority of ethnic churches in the US. William's perspective also relates to his approach to ministering to someone

in his church with mental illness. Noting that some lay people and leaders questioned him about allowing a "crazy person" to take the microphone and pray during worship, he shared,

> Some people won't be able to understand, so I say it in discretion. And the reason is, both of his parents passed away. They knew from long time ago. The siblings never knew. In essence, the parents protected him. There are people who don't understand him. One by one, if they're able to take my words, and if you can do it sharing your personal thoughts . . . I don't tell people. To church lay leaders, I share somewhat about how we should respond.

Taking the time to explain and teach about mental health would be cumbersome and too much for William's congregation to handle. His response is informed by congregants questioning his actions and authority regarding specific uncomfortable situations like interacting with the mentally ill. Beyond his concerns about time limits, it could also be risky for William to respond to people's questioning in ways that might be outside of cultural norms, creating conflict such as William had experienced previously in his context.

Since Guinan is in a relatively new position as an associate pastor under a younger Asian American woman, she navigates her ministerial territory by constantly filtering her actions through the Asian cultural lens against the Americanized background. She noted that her job is to work with a team, to support her senior pastor, and to go to her senior pastor for "final approval" on anything she wants to do. She acknowledged that the current structure of her Asian church, with multiple newish Asian pastors, has been challenging for everyone, including the congregation. Frequently, she has blurted out words expressing her desire to "make space" and that pastors are to "offer space," allowing people to be comfortable with themselves. She draws on her experience of not having had the "space" to question and to be doubtful without bringing a cloud of shame upon herself:

> I'm like, to me [pause], I want [it] myself, and I think one of the roles as a pastor is educator. However, however, I also have little of fear that whatever [pause] I offer to the

> congregation, that it's not all it, right? There are more beyond. So, that's why I'm always nervous and excited whenever I prepare in a sermon, you know.

Unfortunately, Guinan's efforts to create an open space and to show her vulnerability led to unexpected outcomes that now inform her approach to ministry and her view of her pastoral role:

> So, there was spaces and times that I felt pastor as vulnerable. Being vulnerable can be positive to encourage people to share or become, they can, they show their vulnerability. And, but there was a case that people only remember "Pastor Guinan as anxious presence." I didn't intentionally mimic as an anxious person. I just share with them this is my personality and I'm working on it. But they, I mean couple, not everybody—there is always, um [pause], so I have to read the room. Whom I talk to. Older generation, I'm more attentive. I'm more attentive.

She hesitated but boldly continued,

> Also, I feel, I have this experience that I'm just wanting to share, and I'm not afraid or ashamed. I'm not afraid to share with you, and I'm okay with your recording. So, there is one person who always helping in the background. Activity material, she's very creative, very hard-working, and so I worked with her for the Christmas pageant. At that point I noticed she was stressful but she never talked about it. So, um, I thought everything was okay. But after 4, 5 months, I opened the space to talk about it and she expressed that she is still angry about the way I did. So, I'm still reflecting on it. I will spend more time. I tried to reach out to her. She's still helping with church. I really, really didn't talk about it. I told her I've been really sorry that I didn't create the environment that she feel safe enough [to] express herself that she was angry. And there is another person who knew but didn't even mention it to me—then how can I change my way? So it created a kind of tension, and a little bit of conflict. [pause] Because of that I've been thinking about, because I'm a pastor, so she just didn't want to talk about it, or they know that associate come and go, so they don't talk about it? I don't know. So I have more time later, but it is very indirect.

As Guinan questioned her perceived sense of pastoral authority and identity, she learned to "read the room" through a cultural filter and to not appear as an "anxious" person or an unsupportive pastor. She uttered words such as "empowered," "fine," "it's okay," "yeah," but she often completed her sentences by dropping off her voice, showing that she is uncertain about herself and her situation:

> I feel more empowered to, like, a better job, like providing space and engaging with them and how to encourage them [to] work together, and then a part of me is more cautious. Maybe whenever they say "yes," maybe it's not really yes. They don't really mean yes. I really have to be attentive.

Adverse responses from congregation members have formed and impacted how Guinan sees herself in the roles she is expected to fill, such as preaching. The cultural responses she has received now hinder her from speaking boldly, which consequently has led her to appear in a way she does not want to, as anxious.

> It's . . . I made so many mistakes already, as you can imagine. Because of my sermon, the one family, they're kind of offensive or, right? Because I only can speak from my experience, right, so there are always some people left out during sermon, right? Just I, just every single time, whenever I preach, there is like, I would say [pause] holy pressure. Holy tension, right? What if? [sigh] It's a, it's a lot for me. It's a lot, yeah. I feel like this, that, you know, homily, that I gave out this kind of simple and good, but after I received the feedback, oh my gosh, yeah. It was a lot to, it was able to open my eyes, and then, yeah, I've been meditating a lot. It's just so, now I'm preparing for preaching on Mother's Day. That's so nervous. So, you know, preaching is a, so difficult.

The kind of response Guinan has received from her Asian congregation has greatly impacted the pastoral authority she experiences and offers in return. Guinan explained the "holy pressure" or "holy tension" she feels to minister in ways that will not offend any congregation members. Despite wanting to create a space for others to ask "what if"—because it has helped her and could have helped her even earlier—she no longer feels safe to create open spaces or to show her own "what if" space. Not having the answers to everything makes her feel nervous, and she questions the approval and pastoral authority she feels she has and has been given by the congregation. Having all the answers is an impossible expectation, and a standard no one should have to strive to achieve. So, Guinan faces the complex situation of wanting to create a safe place for people to question and learn, but at the same time having to sift through cultural understandings so she doesn't sacrifice her image of being a good pastor. While several participants echoed Guinan's desire to make space, create space, or offer space, those spaces in

actuality seemed limited by how open the congregation was to entering into those spaces. Guinan likened her experience to being at the home of one's in-laws. "But there's a different level of comfort, you know, uh, how I do in my home with my mom has been changed a lot." She cannot claim her pastoral authority because she feels the church is like her in-laws' home, a place where she doesn't naturally have authority to make decisions. This feeling can limit her ability to claim space as a woman in a patriarchal culture holding a leadership role usually dominated by men.

Just like Guinan availed herself of the opportunity to model vulnerability from the pulpit, Geordi also noted, "I embarrass myself enough or I make myself particularly vulnerable. I let people know how much I fail constantly. But I remind people that they're called to be gracious and forgiving, and I've experienced bits and pieces of that here, not as other churches." Geordi also understands the cultural aspect of shame and the difficulty of getting members to share more vulnerably in an Asian context. He explains,

> I think that acknowledging part is hard, confessing that we are struggling with mental health challenges ourselves. And the pandemic open that conversation up to an extent. But as things are starting to open back up to in person slowly, I have the sense that that's starting to fade again, and once people come back in person, those conversations would be hard. Yeah, the impetus to talk about it—I tried to make sure you talk a little bit about [it] during our All Saints Day service or blue Christmas service in particular and to bring those aspects up, but then again, if it's not explicit, like, this is what we're talking about, people miss it.

Geordi added that he preached about suicide but, "I think some people got it and the people who don't like me right now, they didn't get it; they just think, like, he's making me have to forgive him; I don't want to." Even though mental health concerns his congregation, he notes, "My church hates hearing me talk. My more influential church members were telling me they're sick of hearing about the weeds and the rocks into the soil. And to me, they are the particular ones who have been needing to hear." Geordi desired to speak about suicide from the pulpit more than once:

> Yeah, absolutely. Um, I hinted at it every once in a while because of this issue for most of our congregation members. I don't like it's, that's like this. But a number of our members are isolated, not because of the pandemic, but just life stage, and mental health is an issue. But people shrug it off because of shame and want to be self-sufficient. So, I do mention it, but I don't, haven't quite had the time to dive down on it quite yet. And I'm actually reserving that for the end of the year.

While he desires to speak more frequently on these issues from the pulpit, Geordi is only able to go so far as to hint "at it every once in a while." As hard as it is to speak about these issues, it is as hard or harder to push the limits of cultural norms. Breaking out of the boundaries of those norms would be too much to ask of the elders who are already suffering from isolation and depression. To hear and talk vulnerably about mental health and suicide would be too forward and not culturally sensitive. Geordi's exercise of pastoral authority in talking more freely about topics like suicide or other taboo subjects has to be weighed against how well the church can receive his message.

On the other hand, Deanna's exercise of pastoral authority regarding topics like suicide and mental health is empowered by the initiation taken by the mental health advocates in her church. They remind Deanna about inserting helpful articles in newsletters. They are an active presence that continually makes her aware of those affected by suicide by "lifting their names" during weekly worship. These efforts help her act in line with her stance on suicide and meet her congregation's needs. But because of the Asian culture they find themselves in, Deanna and the other pastors do not feel empowered to step drastically away from their usual role as "good" Asian American pastors. They work in increments, making sure not to upset the congregation in ways that would be socially and culturally unacceptable. Deanna is always mindful to acknowledge the families grieving the loss of their loved ones and, at the same time, she makes sure she does not single out a particular family, whether the family approves or not, as this would

go against the cultural norms. She continues to be in good standing as a pastor by following the lead of the members of the church.

I found that this theme of filtering through a cultural lens and constantly checking oneself applied to my interactions with the participants. When the time came to start each interview, I thanked the participant for their time and willingness to share their thoughts and experiences. I reminded them of their rights, what they could expect, and that they could stop at any time if they wished. As previously noted, the first question I asked each participant was to describe their social location. I initially hoped to stick with the same questions for consistency, but I immediately recognized that I would need to adapt. For example, after the second interview, I decided to change the order of my questions. Still, it was hard to shake off the feeling that some participants felt anxious before showing up for their interview on Zoom. During the interviews there were nervous laughs and awkward smiles, swaying of the body, moving back and forth, and speaking with the head down. I figured early on that the interview questions themselves—such as, "What is your understanding of suicide?"—may have felt or sounded like a theology exam on suicide. The participants' body language made me feel bad, and I realized that they were seeing me as an examiner. This concerned me as a researcher as I became more aware of what was unfolding. I noticed my fellow Asian Americans were acting in accordance with Asian cultural norms, and I became aware of how I had brought us into an "Asian" space. I felt that my interviewees were quickly filtering the interview situation through an Asian cultural lens and then relating to me as an Asian, which meant they were behaving in a culturally appropriate manner—or at least that is how I interpreted the situation and what I experienced.

The interview dynamics with a participant who was twenty years older than I were very different from the dynamics with the younger participants. With the more senior participant, as

the researcher and a much younger person, I took on the role of an informed student out of my Confucian identity, asking questions in English and disclosing that I feel more comfortable speaking English than formal Korean. The participant related to me as an equal, then early in the interview asked if he could speak in Korean. I answered, "Sure." He began speaking in Korean and slipped a word into a sentence that designated me as a younger person; he also generally ended his sentences loosely, not using the fully formal Korean. I was surprised by the informality of his statements, which was more apparent when I translated his words into English.

Regardless of my intentions, participants younger than I were open but also showed a level of carefulness and shyness that I did not anticipate. This issue was clearly brought to my attention in the last interview, when the participant candidly said he was worried about the interview initially:

> Well, this is no bust on you, but as I was trying to think, like, oh man, Anna's going to really give me tough questions, and she's so thoughtful, it's going to be intimidating. [Laughed nervously, closing mouth with two hands.] I think the way you framed it, to restate it, and allowed me to reflect [on] what I've experienced, what I've done, what I've already said—I'm grateful for you.

Once, when I struggled to reformulate my question, a younger participant immediately said, "It's my fault. It's my fault. It's my fault." I had taken on the role of an older Asian expert for this person. I thought, "Would my initially sharing as an older person help this person to disclose themselves even more readily?" I reflexively wondered how rare it is to find older adults sharing with those in younger generations on these matters. I instinctively wanted to take the role of the older person and give the younger participants the permission to share through sharing my experiences and ideas first, thus blurring the cultural norms. In the interviews, there were short pauses between the questions and the responses, and I would physically lean forward while nodding to encourage the participants' sharing. I also felt the energy of excitement and, at the

same time, an unfamiliarity and awkwardness as I asked questions of other Asian Americans about a topic that is so difficult to bring up in our religious communities. I noticed in myself that I did not truly hear the question until I listened to my voice in dialogue with people who shared my ethnic background. I asked each participant how suicide was talked about during their developmental years, first in their schools, then in their community of faith (if they belonged to one), and lastly, in their homes. The questions seemed simple enough, but I was also aware that sharing about one's home life with a stranger can be something that is taboo for Asians, especially if sharing leads one to believe that it reflects negatively on the family. To overcome these barriers, I kept modifying and revising the questions to better nuance precisely what I was asking. Internally, I continued to filter my pastoral authority through the Asian cultural lens, which informed and guided my questions.

As Asian Christian communities engage in seeing their pastors through an Asian cultural lens, my participants are then unwittingly bound to relate to congregants by either rejecting the cultural norms projected onto them or by trying to communicate sensitively with their congregants by filtering their role through a cultural lens. All of the participants in this study related to their congregations and myself through a cultural filter. Within cultural boundaries, people learn, through trial and error, how to relate to one another, with each one establishing their role within the relationship. For pastors, though, especially Asian American pastors in Asian American churches, their role as a pastor is relatively fixed from the congregation's standpoint. Through the East Asian cultural lens, pastors are leaders of their communities. They are not merely individual members of the church. They represent the church. They are the face of the church family. As leaders of the community, it would be unwise for pastors to take their

filters off when their churches comprised of Asian Americans have an Asian view of their pastor that the pastor has to fulfill 24/7.

The theme of Asian American pastors filtering their position through a cultural lens—which is not required of them but is often tied to fulfilling the role of the "good" Asian American—has several ramifications for spiritual care. The "good" Asian American person does, feels, and thinks always in relationship to the greater collective to which he or she belongs. The overwhelming weight my research participants put on carefully curating culturally appropriate and sensitive responses in their everyday role as a pastor was interwoven throughout their reflections. This culturally based filtering intersected with their pastoral identity, pastoral authority, and theological agency. Pastors are culturally pressured, a pressure that can be internalized, leading them to respond in ways that closely align with the church's worldview, which is infused with Confucian values. They see themselves and relate to the church as an extension of their family, collective, community, and face. Likewise, the congregation responds and relates to the pastor through a Confucian-influenced Asian cultural lens. The congregants can indirectly positively reinforce "acceptable behaviors" (by giving praise, for example), thus keeping the "peace" within the church, or they can cause havoc by disregarding cultural norms. Participants' understandings of Asian culture, with its focus on avoiding shame and saving face, put the pastors in a precarious position of needing to respond sensitively in a culturally appropriate way. Shame, in particular, is deeply influential in Asian American Christian cultures, and this can be unhelpful at times:

> Now I believe that shame, ashamed, and "shame on you," like that—it's not a good practice. It's not a good practice and it's not God's thing. Shame is, shame is, um, and I think now, I am at a point maybe from my culture and background, I am more generous to myself. And I receive this feedback once in a while. I am kind of hard on myself [laughed]. I am working on that right now. I am a person who needs lots of grace. And I

> want to be graceful for myself, and it's okay to feel not perfect. I'm never going to be perfect. But those things, shame is one thing I am actually working on.

The problem isn't so much that Asian American pastors are silent on the issue of suicide. They desire to speak out and create room for more compassion and vulnerability to seep into their congregations, but they are operating in contexts where it is important for them to fulfill the role of a "good" Asian American pastor by taking on multiple roles and acting in accordance with social norms. These norms and cultural pressures make it very difficult to create spaces where people feel comfortable talking about sensitive subjects like mental illness and suicide. Going against the norms and cultural expectations can negatively impact a pastor's authority and create discord in their congregation. This can be emotionally and relationally taxing for not only the pastor but their immediate family as well. Asian American pastors may find themselves having little space to make mistakes and being expected to attain unrealistic standards; this can lead to burnout. Regardless of the participants' intentions, their hard work may result in "good" outcomes that inadvertently may seem to validate the myth of the model minority. In actuality, they work on a daily basis to balance their role as an Asian American pastor influenced by Confucian ideals with their desire to be advocates for creating safer spaces for Asian Americans to be themselves.

This theme of filtering pastoral authority through a cultural lens reveals how participants understand their pastoral identity in light of their Asian culture and the expectations that come with it. As Asian Americans in an Asian American communal setting, the participants engaged with their congregations through this lens filter, which was a shared understanding of how to relate to one another. Being able to navigate through different assumptions about power (some of which are related to gender) and respond to congregants in culturally sensitive ways, Asian

American pastors may have the greatest potential to bring about change within Asian American congregations.

Sharing Ou-ri Stories

Interestingly, the last theme found in my research emerged out of the process of having moved through the entire interview and spent the final moments wrapping up. Informal conversations after the interviews ended flowed into discussions about and appreciation for the interviews and sharing of personal experiences. As each interview came to a close, I shared some personal concerns I had regarding suicide as it related to my life. This led participants to begin casually talking about themselves using the *ou-ri* form. *Ou-ri*, a possessive plural, means "our" in Korean, and it is often used as a pronoun meaning "my." Rather than saying "my mom" or "my son," we say, "*ou-ri umma*" or "*ou-ri adeul*." Rarely do Koreans assert "my." Rather, we orient ourselves and behave with an "our" mindset, where the community is included. In Korean churches, to show affection, members might refer to their pastor as "ou-ri pastor," signifying endearment and admiration.

This use of *ou-ri* in my sharing with participants was so second nature that I originally did not think to include it as a significant theme. After all, this last theme only showed up when the interview had wound down and was at its tail end. On many occasions, the conversations were not related to the topic of suicide but involved personal matters like family, home church, and work (church), and they evoked great bursts of laughter, smiles, energy, and planning of the future. What occurred in the interviews was an unfolding process of sharing personal stories, and I even saw a shift in participants' thinking and in them showing more vulnerability by exchanging personal feelings. As comfort and a sense of safety settled in, perhaps participants

felt freer to share "off the record," so to speak. They were more candid about their experiences—but in their sharing was the theme of "our."

Including the community in how we bring ourselves into our contexts communicates much about the ways Asians, and particularly Koreans, see themselves in relation to others. The word *ou-ri*, which means "our" and which encompasses "words signifying the community over the self, the family over the individual," orients how we see ourselves in relation to others.[9] Kim notes that "the plural possessive forces us to look at community, the body of Christ, and the communion of saints as elemental forces that exist harmoniously outside Western individualism."[10] Several of the Asian American pastors in my study noted that the self-care taught in seminaries and during the ordination process should be called "ou-ri care" among Asian American Christians. Asian Americans cannot simply crop themselves out of the family picture or the community to which they belong in order to take care of themselves, for we cannot take care of ourselves unless we have the support of our community that gives us the space to care for ourselves. The overriding care for others runs deeply within us, which means the ties between us cannot easily be broken. This perspective of putting the needs of others over our own may sound problematic. However, rather than perceiving it as a problem, I understand it to be an asset for Asian American Christians. The communal care orientation that causes Asian American pastors to be conscientious about engaging in culturally sensitive manners with their congregants is in line with my process theological understandings that we are all interconnected and interdependent.

Geordi noted, "What I take away mostly is that I get to talk with someone I know. Like, I have someone, I like, a hundred and ten percent trust you." He moved on to share about his

[9] G. J. Kim, *Invisible*, 139.
[10] G. J. Kim, *Invisible*, 140.

marriage, to candidly talk about the state of Asian American churches right now, to inviting me for a pulpit exchange, and to considering inviting a specialist to speak on mental health. "So that's why I'm so glad, like, I think when, we, I know it's crazy, but this Advent and Thanksgiving, during the season, but if sometime in November, December, if we might even just get a recording of you. I'm going to, I might come back to you." He added,

> What are we really building the Kingdom of God together about, like, what are we really talking about? And how do we include everyone in their gifts and talents to be able to do that, including talking about mental health by caring for one another; and I've adopted this phrase, I don't really, I'm having a hard time believing in self-care anymore. I phrase it to "ou-ri" care now.

He went on to state,

> So much of what the church hasn't done in the last some century now because of just modern marvels, there's a lot lost, the full sense of beauty care or our care, together we care. There's no good, being "our-care" might be the best thing we can translate, but I just think we need *ou-ri* because it does both. For me, and teach people Korean a little bit, but that, to me, is the framework of how we can actually work together and do anything, and especially with mental health. Because mental health is not from isolation, it's from interaction.

It was after I stopped recording and he had begun talking freely about himself that Geordi wanted to share. With his permission, I began recording again: "In my freshman year in college, there was a suicide. Being in an Asian Christian club, we didn't talk very much about it. That's intense, that we didn't talk too much about it." He ended up ministering to someone from the same club who didn't feel comfortable sharing because everything sinful was "automatically" equated with going to hell. She later became a nurse and wrote to him that he had helped her by giving her space to question. Geordi reflected,

> We need to stick around for the questions to ruminate. But I didn't get to that point of concern because sermon was getting long. But I think that was the most I could allow for those who survived, who experienced that. To allow them that space to question and know that it wasn't their fault and they knew it. From the facts, but you can't help but feel guilty in the sense that "could we not have done any more?" To give them that space to process together, and so, for me, my theology was, there's a lot of grace in this; even at

> that time in college, I was like, "Well, God still has that person. I'm sure beyond what we can understand. And God is holding these people now."

Guinan talked about her children and closed with, "Well, that's our story." I proceeded to share a bit about my son. After some time, she shared, "I'm glad this schedule was able to work out," and she mentioned the emotional stress she had felt after preaching the day before. Then again, she repeated, "I'm so glad we were able to set up the time today. Yesterday I preached and I noticed that I kind of, I was kind of stressed. I felt so bad and stressed, but I think, I need some time to let go of that, but while we were talking, I was able to let go of that. So, I'm glad that this schedule worked out." She offered that, if I needed clarification, she would make herself available to meet with me again.

I did follow up with Guinan for some clarification and interviewed her a second time. By the second time around, her previous understanding of suicide as sinful had been modified to an assurance that it is not: "No, it's not sin." She provided more details about her background and how she thinks in "ou-ri" terms:

> I was not called not by my name. I was always called "Mr. Kim's youngest daughter" or "the sixth child." They probably, many people probably didn't know my name but knew me as Mr. and Mrs. Kim's child, right? She has six siblings and she goes to this school and how she does at school, everybody knows. So, whatever I did outside of the house directly impacts my parents. So, I really have to do my best to present my family in a good way in the public. But the one place that, one place for me, my mom and father couldn't reach out was church because they didn't go to church when I was a child. [Long pause.] So I grew up as learning something [pause]. I know something that my parents don't know about me. I kind of felt special.

Even as a child, Guinan understood the implications of how people viewed her as an extension of her family. Interestingly, the church became a place where she was not associated with her family. In some sense, she discovered a space that has allowed her to be herself without having to think in "our" terms with her family. This is a case that shows how ou-ri thinking can be limiting or, if taken too far, fail to address an individual's needs. In the church, Guinan had the

freedom to be herself without the constraints of being connected to her family in such a way that she always had to think about how her behaviors reflected back on her family.

Reflecting on the interview experience, Wesley shared,

> I don't know you very well, but this was fun. I think, like, we don't get a chance to [talk] because we're so, such in the lens of, how do I talk to my youth, how do I talk to my congregation, how do I like talk to ha-ra-buh-jiis [grandpa]? We're always filtering and so, when I think we're talking with other clergy about this stuff, it allows for kind of sharing and growing as opposed to a very, like, I'm the expert when I talk to my congregation. I'm perceived to be an expert in this context, so I have to be a little bit more intentional about what I say as opposed to, I think, in this context. I can, yeah, I don't know. I don't know. I don't, struggle, right? I think that allows for that and that allows for me to shape even the ways that I'm thinking about it too, so, yeah, it was good. I like it.

Wesley was much more expressive and gestured animatedly as he spoke about his experience of this interview. He values sharing varying perspectives and thinking out loud with a conversational partner. He distinguished such sharing from how Asian American pastors position themselves when speaking to their congregations about mental health or suicide. He used the term *filter* to point out that context matters in how clergy speak to their congregants. He shared right off the bat that conversations in settings with ou-ri-mindedness can help him discern changes or shifting perspectives in his thinking.

William, at the end of the interview, told me I was doing important work, and he gave me encouragement. He spoke to me as an older person talking to a younger person, so his comments were different from those of other participants, who simply noted being thankful for the experience. He said, "In reality, it is nearly impossible for a solo pastor to help the congregation—if there is someone who is, preferably, connected to the church who can be supportive, doing the supportive work, I believe that is essential and an excellent idea."

The last theme, sharing ou-ri stories in the midst of closing conversations, took me by surprise. Asian Americans thinking in "our" terms in every aspect of their lives is something that

should be noted. Thinking and viewing the world in this cultural way, calculating how one's actions might ripple out and affect others, is innate and natural. The hive-mind-like "our" over "my" is deeply intuitive and shapes how we view ourselves. I imagine that the value and the practice of ou-ri evident in our everyday language guides us to think and behave in a collective way rather than individually; we always are thinking about the well-being of the entire collective. Ou-ri takes into account not just the individual but also the whole, "we." Ou-ri is a way of being within the world with others. Ou-ri represents how each individual is important to the whole body.

As helpful as it may be, overemphasizing ou-ri can have its downfalls. The use of *ou-ri* can be exclusive to the people who belong to the group that *ou-ri* refers to. For example, the Bible does not "commend a sense of blind group loyalty devoid of singularized identity and personal autonomy. Overemphasizing group loyalty and solidary to the exclusion of individual rights and desires produces its own set of issues."[11] Despite the dualism that exists between collectivism and individualism, these values of East and West are not mutually exclusive. However, sharing in a communal space with a mutual understanding of the cultural norms can be a powerful experience, shifting and transforming our ways of thinking and being. A shared ou-ri space can also become a creative space that is experienced as nurturing and supportive.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the four significant themes that impacted Asian American pastors' understandings of suicide. The findings showed that suicide needs to be understood in light of how it affects Asian Americans differently than other ethnic groups. Churches ought to regularly educate their congregants and talk about suicide on an ongoing basis. In the next

[11] G. J. Kim, *Invisible*, 143.

chapter, I offer process theology as a life-giving theology that can empower Asian Americans to collectively debunk the stigma of suicide altogether, which will allow Asian Americans to approach suicide in a positive way, develop theological imaginations, hold the tension between Asian cultural norms and Christian mission, and share ou-ri stories as part of the healing work that is needed. We can begin to assess or evaluate how unexamined theologies around suicide in Asian American faith communities have stood in the way of attending to the emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being of Asian Americans. In the next chapter, I describe how these findings can provide insights for developing culturally sensitive measures to address hard subjects like suicide in shame-based Christian communities.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This study gathered thick descriptions of Asian American pastors' understandings of suicide and their embedded theologies of suicide. Specifically, four distinct themes that pertained to the research question emerged from my thematic analysis and coding of the data. In this chapter, by utilizing Richard Osmer's framework, I will begin to unpack the practicalities of how my findings relate to spiritual care. After identifying critical concepts related to the four themes, I will discuss how ou-ri care can be developed and honed as a spiritual care practice that can be operationalized in the Asian American Christian context.

Unpacking Richard Osmer's Framework

Using Osmer's framework to understand what is going on in Asian American faith communities based on my findings revealed that Asian American Christians' understandings of suicide begin with any encounter with passive or active suicide in their lifetime. Encounters can range from personal experiences to observing how others respond to suicide. In particular, personal experiences of contemplating suicide seemed to have a significant impact in shaping my participants' understandings of suicide and how they dealt with suicide when they assumed the identity of a pastor. Their lived experiences did not match their embedded theologies of suicide. While many of them had picked up the idea that suicide is sinful, their personal learning experiences and lived experiences of interacting with people close to suicide continued to complexify and add meaning to their previous understandings of suicide and mental health.

Each of my research participants' encounters with suicide was distinct, but the descriptions of their experiences with suicide showed me that the number of such encounters by Asian American pastors far exceeds my previous notions. Suicide is much more common in

Asian American Christian communities than some might think. Each encounter with suicide leaves an impression that shapes and influences one's understanding of suicide. Such encounters provided my participants with pathways to discovering their own embedded theologies around suicide, theologies that they came to wrestle with or question. My findings reveal that encounters with suicide are personal and relational and have the ability to directly shape and inform people's lived experiences.

The second theme of embracing theological imagination captures Asian American Christians' both/and holding of embedded theological assumptions along with new ideas and narratives that shape their understandings of suicide. Such theological imagination often includes one's previous knowledge of suicide held side-by-side with a new understanding. Repeated encounters can lead to questioning or reevaluating one's embedded theology. What my research revealed was that there was a yearning to know how Asian Americans can respond compassionately toward those impacted by suicide. Developing theological imagination took on the shape of reevaluating current theologies against other, novel perspectives that shed light in a different way.

The third theme, filtering through a cultural lens, revealed that Asian Americans in Asian American Christian contexts operate through a lens where their churches become an extension of Confucian families that maintain and reinforce Confucian values. As such, this filter is consistently used by Asian American pastors to respond in culturally appropriate ways. Asian American pastors are precariously in a position where they have to put the needs of the church as a whole before their individual needs.

None of the literature that I examined as part of this study emphasized that the role and identity of a pastor within an Asian American Christian community hold a certain cultural weight

that often leads them to operate as a "good" Asian American pastor. Asian American pastors in this study were hyper-aware of cultural norms, such as shame and saving face, that sometimes challenged and discouraged them from developing a truly communal Christian life in the church. At the same time, pastors functioned within their cultural identity by responding sensitively to their Asian American communities by adhering to cultural norms and values. This can leave no space or opportunity to steer congregants in a new direction and at the same time maintain cultural cohesiveness and harmony. Asian American pastors also held the strenuous job of maintaining their good standing in their churches while creating opportunities to speak on important topics like suicide and mental wellness, which they had to do implicitly or passively, without being direct, per cultural norms.

As reflected in my participants' narratives, they were keenly aware that "shame" and the desire to save face or appear as self-sufficient interfered with Asian Americans' ability to lean on others during "moments of crisis when we need community folks to come alongside us," as Deanna shared. Geordi nuanced how shame is culturally viewed:

> In Japanese culture, what I'm sensing is, self-sufficiency is key. And bearing with a pain is part of self-sufficiency. That sharing of any pain is, in a sense, not being Japanese enough. And enough Japanese Americans have told me . . . , culture, that's what makes them reinstate that, and that's [the] expectation they have of one another. So, for themselves, they don't want to bring shame and embarrassment to their own families. At the same time, others may not want to be bothered by that [sharing of pain], because there has not been enough ways [to] know how to care for people in that state. So, for the outside parts, like, I don't even know what to do with that. Why would you make me uncomfortable with that information now, like, why would you do that to me. Because they know how you feel when other people doing that to them, they don't want it to others, and it's a cyclical thing of not burdening one another, and this way, church, the Christian Church, is such an anomaly, where we share our burdens one another as core. So, it's almost a savior complex type of thing going on, where they will help everyone else who needs help, but they won't ask for help themselves, unless if things are really fine, even then, like I, we will find out that after they died. Like, such death, they will take that suffering to their grave as a means of not trying to be toxic. It's their way of being most loving to the community.

Wesley observed,

> I think some of the barriers that I recognized from the immigrant population, because I don't think I experienced the same with the second generation or third generation, but as an immigrant standpoint, it's a matter of shame. I think so much of the upbringing of the individual is credited or discredited to the previous generation. The prior of generation. And so, depending on the culture of shaming, each community, depending on which church, or what community group that people are in, I think people are either willing to share or not share, and not one to share, not to open an embarrassment or shame, and that's a huge barrier.

Guinan also shared how shame operates in the Asian American church she serves:

> What I experience, I think what I experience, they are open to sharing the pride, and then good things, but they are not open for [shaking head] weakness or um, I don't know—what to say that … If there's some ministry happening, then they, they definitively talk about it positively, and there is obvious focus, you know. [If there is] area to improve—they don't talk about it. They only talk about whatever is positive and good outcome. So, I think it's cultural.

All of my participants attributed deeply embedded notions of shame and embarrassment as reasons for their congregants' reluctance to "accompany" one another. Interestingly, Asian American pastors also filter their pastoral agency and authority in their ministerial context through this same cultural lens. Some of them have risked being vulnerable, a trait that is rarely seen in Asian communities, in hopes of modeling it and giving their congregants the permission to make mistakes, grieve, and ask contradicting questions. These persons have reaped the negative repercussions of being vulnerable in a shame-based community. However, most of them have stayed within the cultural bounds of the neutral zone where no one is hurt, offended, or upset. Cultural attitudes are also tied to the participants' approaches to their theologies of suicide. Similar to the findings of other researchers, many of my participants did not feel confident addressing suicide in their churches.

As Asian American pastors who are keenly familiar with the cultural underpinnings of how shame operates in their communities, my participants actively attempt, imagine, and dream

about “these beautiful small groups where people are vulnerable with each other and share, and they feel inspired or challenged to do justice work,” as **X** said. “That’s not going to happen for a long time. But you asked about my dreams.” However, Asian American pastors who are sensitive to responding to their congregants in a culturally appropriate way are also implicitly put on a pedestal so they can keep a tight ring on the whole operation of the church. Even if their burning theology on suicide is transformational or they believe that small groups are the answer to breaking shame as a barrier, they would not necessarily have a guarantee that they could roll out their plan as usual, especially when they are perceived as doing something against the church’s norms.

What ought to be going on? Given the number of suicide encounters that influenced Asian American pastors’ understandings of suicide and mental health, most often expanding their horizons, Asian Americans ought to create as many opportunities as possible for engaging in preventive work. One participant was surprised by the number of community members of the “Bible Belt of the West” who showed up for the Mental Health Sunday Awareness workshop initiated by an advocate for mental health. “I should have higher expectations for my church!” she exclaimed. Not all the pastors had been trained or were up to date on mental health issues.

Likewise, it would be helpful for Asian American Christians to be exposed to more suicide-related workshops and education, addressing the community’s fear of the unknown. Along with creating localized events for Asian American communities to learn various theological perspectives on suicide, Asian American pastors can develop a clearer theology of suicide that aligns with their cultural values and beliefs and move their congregants toward more life-giving theologies that allow them to respond with compassion and care toward those who are suffering. Many of my participants held a “working theology” that stemmed from or echoed

traditional beliefs, such as equating suicide with sin, and which merged with cultural stigmas and shame. Yet, the same participants had grace-filled responses to individuals afflicted with suicide; they questioned their embedded theologies and some even rejected the concept of hell. Data analysis showed that the participants did not negate their previous understandings of suicide by discarding their embedded theologies. Instead, they held their embedded theologies with an open stance that allowed them to create space for other perspectives to enrich their understandings of suicide.

As Asian American pastors, my participants felt that part of their role was to help immigrants and Asian Americans move from engaging in dichotomous black-and-white thinking toward embracing the gray areas, so safe spaces can be created that allow for vulnerability to be expressed. At the same time, their role as pastors is to keep the church congregation at peace and running smoothly. But keeping the congregation from getting upset is more critical to their role as good Asian American pastors. They understand that challenging the status quo or doing something outside the norm can induce stress, chaos, and disharmony, and this will disrupt the comfortable temperature of their churches. Since my participants identify as part of the Asian church community, they as leaders try to sensitively and carefully respond to congregants and exercise their pastoral authority in a culturally filtered way. This means that while they were aware of the need to preach on suicide, teach suicide prevention, and create vulnerable spaces in order to break down the barriers of shame, many put more emphasis on or were more influenced by the necessity of ensuring that their congregations' needs were met first. Sometimes submersing their own needs and desires for the church, they worked to iron out all the knots. The realities of working as a pastor for an Asian American community may mean that Asian American pastors feel less incentive to veer drastically away from their congregations' cultural

expectations, especially if there is pushback from those communities. My participants acknowledged that creating change is a slow process in their hard-to-change cultures.

How might we respond? The silence of and care missing from our Asian American churches in terms of suicide can first be addressed by providing communal spaces for Asian American pastors to share their personal experiences and stories. For example, Asian American pastors can engage in sharing our/ou-ri stories on suicide or mental wellness with one another to build upon and expand their working embedded theologies by listening to other people's stories and experiences. In sharing together, they will also engage in caring for one another as two or more individuals become "we." Given the strong influence of Confucian values that have seeped deep into the experiences of Asian American Christians, coloring our worldviews and impacting how we make sense of our interactions with one another, the role of the Asian American pastor in the prevention of suicide will mean looking beyond the "good" pastor trap of protecting one's flock from one's uncertain or unconfident theology and keeping one's congregation away from such complex topics. Rather, Asian American pastors can intentionally set out to engage in the first theme found in this study, encountering suicide, by creating spaces where conversations with other clergy can uplift the diverse experiences of Asian American Christians.

However, Asian American pastors feel pressured to take on the role of a good pastor, ensuring there is cohesion and peace in their congregations. They take on the role of meeting the congregation at the people's level without stirring up the group. This can come at the cost of sacrificing their desire to maintain the church in good standing and to keep their pastoral identity intact. Talk on matters or behaviors that may go against the grain, whether they be political or challenging, like suicide, may appear to be risky and overwhelming, especially when pastors do not feel they are equipped well to address these issues or are not sure of their theology. Rocking

the congregation against the cultural norms, and creating discomfort in a collective family, may be hard to tolerate. The fear of not being viewed in a positive light in one's very own Asian community's church, where one's authority resides, is a fear of feeling ashamed that can inhibit pastors from taking disruptive actions.

Complexifying Suicide in Asian American Churches

In truth, the academic community has just now awakened to the lack of research on Asian American suicide, when Asian Americans have one of the highest suicide rates in our country. Pastors may only be able to name one or two people in their pews affected by suicide but there are certainly far more people impacted by suicide than we would like to admit, even possibly right in front of us as people with hidden suicide ideations. The cultural lens utilized in the Asian American church community, which includes Asian American pastors, draws upon a Confucian value system that maintains the importance of keeping all parties working harmoniously together. The pressure to keep the church at peace and to represent oneself as a good pastor of one's community and as a good representative member of one's church can be overwhelming for Asian American Christian pastors. Such efforts all come with a cost.

Thus far, caregiving and care practices have not contextually met the needs of Asian American Christians. The same barriers for why Asian Americans often do not seek and are less likely than other ethnic or racial groups to seek mental health assistance also influence Asian American pastors, whose identity is the face of their collective community. Spiritual communities and churches ought to be the first responders to a crisis, especially in cases where someone is on the verge of ending their life or on a pathway to destruction. Churches ought to be prepared to respond to suicide in a culturally nuanced way and provide healthy theologies that affirm and do not shame, which is an embedded attitude held within Asian communities.

Churches can be more active in taking a central role in prevention, intervention, and postvention to reach more Asian Americans. It helps if pastors work through their theology on suicide or mental wellness so they can speak life-giving messages that other communities are not presenting. The pastor's compassionate position on suicide will likely make it more possible to create a relatively safe environment where other complex topics besides suicide, such as racism, homophobia, and climate change, can be discussed. To have safe spaces, pastors need to communicate to their congregations and communities that they are safe to speak to and that they are knowledgeable and confident (even if they feel they are not).

Pastoral theology needs to become a living and breathing practice that is embodied through lived experience, language, preaching, and education in prevention that challenge unhealthy or unhelpful theologies operating in Asian American churches. Asian American churches can be a focal gateway to reach so-called difficult-to-reach Asian American communities. Studies show that it often isn't just hopelessness that leads someone to suicide—it's hopelessness plus burdensomeness or dis-belongingness. Churches can alleviate and address both of these areas.

Based on my participants' shared narratives of their lived experiences and understandings of suicide, I was able to identify that first, encountering suicide, whether passively or actively, during their lifetime directly informed participants' understandings of suicide. Moreover, encounters continued to shape and form their knowledge of suicide. Since encounter is the intersection where one is most open to change, it may be worthwhile to focus and ponder in this space so other realities might take shape.

Second, participants' understandings of suicide evolved from the deconstructive activity of questioning their embedded theologies toward intentional theologies of suicide. Almost all the

participants agreed that the general understanding of suicide in the Asian American community is not helpful, because it is ingrained with stigma and unwarranted shame towards those directly impacted by suicide. Many participants held a working theology that questioned, for example, what sin is, and they recognized that their views derived from the Western theologies first brought to their cultures by missionaries. Others left the question of what it means to die by suicide open, leaving it in God's hands with the comment, "But I'm not the judge in the end." Hence, the second theme found in this study was "developing theological imagination," which encompassed participants' ongoing assessment of their embedded theologies and a willingness to explore deliberate, life-giving theologies that meet the needs of Asian Americans in a culturally appropriate way.

Thirdly, filtering pastoral authority through a cultural lens provides insight into the pastoral authority and agency participants understand they have as they look through their particular cultural lenses in their pastoral settings. This theme describes participants' engagement in their religious contexts, which involves actively filtering their role and identity through a cultural lens. It entails participants understanding that their pastoral identity is projected onto them by their Asian congregations using an Asian cultural lens. As Asian Americans in an Asian American communal setting, participants engaged with their congregations through the filter of this lens, which gave them a shared understanding of how to relate to one another. Often, filtering one's pastoral authority through a cultural lens involves the rigorous activity of navigating through assumptions about power, some of which are related to gender and gendered roles, and responding in a culturally sensitive manner that reflects Confucian values. Cultural assumptions about power and authority have many implications for Asian American pastors, especially Asian American women pastors serving in Asian American churches.

Asian American women pastors expressed concern about misusing power in a way that exploits people or harms them intentionally, a concern that was not fully stated by male participants. Male participants took on a more assertive role in their ministerial positions, directing small groups to designate specific times on the yearly church calendar to address particular themes. Women pastors made decisions within the context of the larger collective, or with their congregation in mind. For example, Asian American women expressed concern for ensuring that in their role as "leaders," they take a position that welcomes people and offers space for holding grief and asking doubting questions. They seemed to have a clear sensitivity to the power dynamics that added a layer of complexity in their understanding of their leadership positions. Both men and women pastors valued the importance of vulnerability and saw that it was needed in Asian American churches, but they had also experienced the adverse consequences of having their pastoral authority questioned because they "led" in an unfamiliar or new way. At the same time participants took on the role of being an Asian American pastor—a leader in their community—they also took on the responsibility of being a "good" Asian American pastor. Eventually, participants created a novel space within the interview context, which became a claimed space where they could disclose more vulnerable experiences.

Participants who were allowed to share and hear other people's perspectives on suicide found these experiences were encounters in themselves, where their theological imaginations were stretched and shifted, moving beyond dualism. And while all these interactions were filtered through a particular lens that viewed the world in a culturally specific way, participants also took an active role in understanding their experiences in light of what had been shared, and this seemed to have a positive impact on them, which leads me to the fourth theme of sharing our/ou-ri stories.

Ou-ri in Community

We Asian American Christians' way of being organically in the world involves not only bringing "my" face to the table but also the many faces and lives that we view as part of ourselves. The Korean word *ou-ri* translates to "our," but it is used to refer to oneself as well as to *our* in the literal first-person plural possessive sense. When people in the Asian community are gathered, we tend to operate in an "our" mentality, where each person actively thinks of the greater body represented in the space as one with the person's self. An individual who is part of a community, group, or family operates in an "our" mindset, which includes the interests of the self along with the community to which one belongs. *Ou-ri,* which literally means "we," but is also used in place of "I/mine," represents more than an aggregate of individuals who retain their separate selves. Unlike the Western understanding of "we," ou-ri "represents a greater whole in which individual elements are no longer differentiated; it connotes a oneness, an intimacy, a bonding that erases boundaries between selves."[1] Likewise, it is an understanding of the self that is concerned with others around oneself. Putting the well-being of others above oneself is second nature for Asian Americans. The basic tenets of Confucian traditions encourage Asian Americans to value respecting elders, devotion to education, and family loyalty.[2] Confucian ideals are a way of orienting oneself in the world that expands the self and others.

Confucian themes like seeking the highest good within the greater circle of interdependent relationships we have in the world parallel process theological ideas. In process theology, the "well-being of others and one's well-being are interconnected" and "for any of us to experience the fullness of life, all of us must be on the road to healing and wholeness."[3]

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[1] Diane M. Hoffman, "Culture, Self, and '*URI*': Anti-Americanism in Contemporary South Korea," *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* 12, no. 2 (1993): 3–20, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03023351.

[2] Hoffman, "Culture, Self, and '*URI*,'" 12.

[3] Epperly, *Process Theology*, 88.

Process thought, for example, takes a social-relational view of the world. Similar to Confucianism, process thought acknowledges the relational aspect of individuals and that relationships make up the greater whole. Thus, process thinking can be readily accessible for Asian American Christians who also resonate with the values found in Asian culture. In other words, drawing upon a postmodern theology like process theology offers an alternative way of thinking that is similar to and consistent with Korean culture. Furthermore, process thought values having open spaces to hold tension and conflict.

It takes all of ourselves to go on a journey toward healing that does not numb and minimize our pain as acceptable or reasonable. Epperly writes, "What we deny or dismiss in the world around us also shapes our experience and will impact our faith."[4] To our detriment, we Asian Americans have internalized how we have been taught to represent ourselves in the spaces we occupy so as to avoid doing anything that might bring shame on ourselves and our families and communities. Because the concept of ou-ri is all-encompassing, it can be enhanced, strengthened, destroyed, and cut apart. I imagine we are all seeking a journey toward liberation. So often, moving toward healing means we must pave our way carrying our total load on our backs, without the most important people in our life supporting us. It is a lonesome and treacherous journey, especially when one feels as though no one can fully understand one's experience.

Having More than One Perspective

One of the key values that participants shared in their interviews was the need to understand their embedded theologies and also have space to actively think out loud about how their thinking affirmed their experiences. Multiple times participants expressed the value of

[4] Epperly, *Process Theology*, 89.

holding more than one point of view. Many participants believed that holding only one perspective often failed to account for other perspectives critical to their understanding of their experiences. It seems that Asian American Christians can benefit from having both/and standpoints that embrace their full breadth of experiences. This finding also points to my participants' intentionality in holding multiple perspectives and moving away from either/or black-and-white thinking. For them, having multiple views and locating themselves somewhere between two polar ends was an act of reclaiming their space.

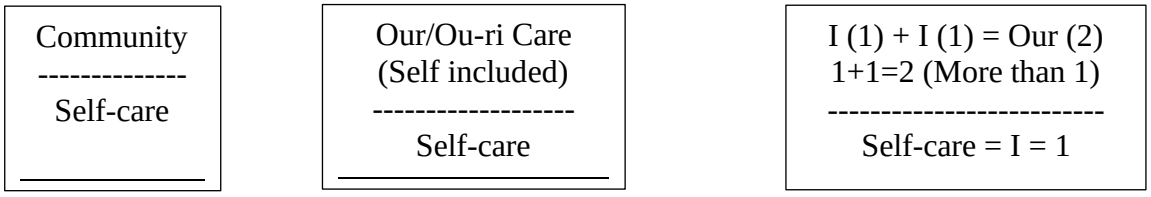
The value of holding multiple perspectives may reflect how often Asian American experiences are categorized in simplistic categories that do not acknowledge the complexities and diversity in the Asian American experience. As a way to push back on having Asian American experiences pigeon-holed into culturally expected boxes, participants actively called out the importance of taking a larger, collective view.

From Self-Care to Ou-ri Care

Because it has elements that resonate with Confucianism, process theology can serve as an instrumental tool to analyze the data and my participants' experiences from a Christian perspective. To create a pastoral care practice that can address the needs of Asian American Christians might involve reframing self-care to "ou-ri care," which shifts the focus of care from the individual to the collective. In Asian American contexts, the emphasis is almost entirely on putting the welfare of others before yourself. In other words, self-care is not a concept that is easily adopted by Asian Americans. More directly, for Asian Americans to engage in self-care, they will need support and permission from the rest of the collective community to freely indulge in an activity that seemingly only benefits one person. Again, the individual self can never

entirely separate from the collective whole. Thus, the needs of Asian Americans may be best addressed by practices oriented toward ou-ri care, rather than individual care.

What does ou-ri care which combines Confucian values and Christian teachings look like? Where the needs of the community often rule the norm of self-care, a revised norm of ou-ri care would involve caring for the needs of the "our" over the needs of oneself. Asian Americans' way of being involves seeking the greater good of the whole. For Asian American pastors, self-care may be difficult to engage in, especially if the demands of the community frequently override attending to one's particular needs. However, in the case of ou-ri care, Asian American pastors can locate themselves under the "our" umbrella and mutually engage in acts of care that attend to the wellness of everyone in the community, including the pastor. Seeking ou-ri care instead of self-care can be more permissible because the care aspect includes the more significant sum of the whole and not just the individual. At the same time, because the self is intentionally located in the "our," the self that is part of the "our" will be cared for by the other people in the group and vice versa, fulfilling the needs of all parties.



Ou-ri care continues to hold the collective identity, while meeting the needs of the individual more profoundly than practicing self-care alone. Considering ou-ri over self-care is significant, because almost all the participants in this study engaged in caring for the needs of their churches over their own individual needs. While individual needs are certainly tied to the

welfare of the larger collective, Asian American religious leaders may not always be positioned to put their own needs over the community's.

Through ou-ri care, Asian American pastors can engage with other Asian American pastors and find that there is more than one way of caring for themselves, more than one way of understanding suicide, and more than one way of viewing God. By sharing ou-ri stories, pastors can hear various perspectives, encounter suicide in a new light, and become better positioned to embrace and develop a theological imagination that embodies more than a single view. The act of sharing ou-ri stories involves naming our experiences, which is a faithful response to the tensions, dichotomies, and complex cultural underpinnings that impact Asian American Christians. Sharing ou-ri stories is an act of defiance against the watering down of Asian American experiences into a melting pot. The sharing of ou-ri stories concerning others offers us a way of weaving together our past, our future, and the open possibilities God offers.[5]

Verbalizing ou-ri stories also entails imagining how God might respond to suicide. Just as Asian Americans cannot separate themselves from the larger collective we belong to, God cannot separate Godself from us. Instead, understanding ourselves in connection with others also helps us to imagine a God who aches with us. It would not be a stretch to imagine that the God of process theology patiently waits for us to do everything within our power to prevent evil and to ease suffering. While many Asian Americans have often felt invisible in US society, we have never been invisible to God. Instead, God does everything in God's power to work for the good, which is one way of understanding Romans 8:28: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God." In addition, God calls the community to respond responsibly to

[5] Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 33.

the members of the community with loving support. This is how we "wring good from the pain without ever calling the pain good."[6]

A God who experiences the depths of our pain is perhaps seeking more spaces where people's burdens, suffering, and internalized shame can be held with loving support by their community. Thus, this God of process theology might look upon an Asian American community that has a keen, innate understanding, both individually and collectively, of what it means to embody an ou-ri mindset and challenge it to begin the work of decolonizing its white, patriarchal theology of God. Western theology, which is often dualistic and logical, does not reflect the creative and responsive God who sees a part of Godself in us and us in God. While some theologies and traditions seek to minimize the full range and breadth of our human experiences, learnings, and discoveries, a life-giving theology would mirror the diversity and complexities of Asian American experiences.

When Asian Americans' experiences are limited to fit into simple categories, many Asian Americans may falsely believe that "God is the ultimate source of both illness and suffering, and good and evil," and consequently respond with theological answers that say it is "God's will or a tragedy disguised in mystery."[7] However, the God of process theology welcomes the ou-ri mindset that helps us see ourselves as part of those around us and woos us into God's gentle embrace, connecting the experiences of everyone in the community. In actuality, God desires to create not God's vision for us but ours, an ou-ri vision that reflects our creative initiative in God's dream for us.[8]

[6] Mesle, *Process Theology*, 84.
[7] Epperly, *Process Theology*, 32.
[8] Epperly, 128.

Since the topic of suicide can be emotionally charged or foreign to Asian American churches, these churches can begin to give Asian Americans experiences of "encountering suicide" by hosting open community events such as workshops and continuing education and by connecting individuals and families with resources readily available in the community. These opportunities can be accessible and non-threatening ways to proactively lead Asian American congregations and the greater Asian American community to engage with the topics of suicide and mental health. The first theme found in this study revealed that encountering suicide can be seen as a positive new experience that informs people's understandings of mental health and suicide. Giving people novel experiences can lead to creative transformation, something that is valued in process theology.

Moving from Fixed to Fluid Theologies

Asian American pastors and their ecumenical entities can support Asian American communities by first developing a theological imagination that can move people from embedded theologies to intentional theologies on suicide and then by continuing to engage in theological exploration on an ongoing basis. This can promote positive encounters with the topic of suicide and expand Asian American pastors' repertoires and theological language surrounding suicide to encourage life-breathing language that resonates with Asian Americans' lived experiences and contexts. They have often searched for spiritual reward and justice by addressing the injustices and oppression experienced in this life. Such activity was a way to consume the pain deepening their *han* in the moment, and then they expected God to respond accordingly. What I imagine many Asian Americans want is a definitive yes or no to the question of whether suicide is a sin. However, rather than supporting congregants in their search for the right answer, Asian American pastors can emphasize the value of the journey or the process of studying and working

out their own theologies that moves them in an intentional life-giving direction. Findings from this study showed that many participants felt uncertain about stating clearly their open stance on suicide. Yet there was also an openness to actively filtering their current understandings through the lenses of their current congregational contexts. Some participants were even able to get to a place to question their embedded theology and assert that suicide is not a sin.

Participants' embedded theologies included the learning from Christian teachings and spiritual formation that suicide is a sin. Some participants were ambivalent about or appeared to be in a gray space concerning this teaching, wondering if a loving God would condemn a person to hell for suicide. Participants frequently used the word *spaces* to speak to the lack of space for Asian Americans to move beyond black-and-white thinking and embrace the novel activity of questioning the traditional teachings about God in our Asian communities. All the participants spoke to the value of thinking in different ways about theological topics in their lives as Asian Americans, as opposed to thinking in dualistic terms and dualistically differentiating between right and wrong, shameful and not shameful.

Pastoral caregivers and Asian American pastors can proclaim more explicitly and clearly in their communities the need to find ways to create room for questioning and to pause and nurture the curious minds and hearts of Asian American Christians, helping them identify how their experiences intersect with religion and culture. A process-relational theology can provide Asian American Christians with an understanding of the dynamics of power at play. It can challenge us to reflect on how our worldviews and belief systems are congruent with or irrelevant to our lived experiences. Through process thought and pastoral relationships, Asian

American Christians can stretch and reformulate their current understandings of God's presence and power in their lives.[9]

Engaging in sharing of ou-ri stories can help Asian Americans ponder the limitations of their understandings and turn toward new possibilities. A spiritual caregiver can respond communally by creating an actual physical space and resources to strengthen and diversify Asian American Christians' ethos and offer a more culturally nuanced view of the process God, one that does not lead us into hiding when we are suffering. Asian American Christians are typically not afforded the theological space and the physical grounds to be our whole range of who we are and multiple parts of ourselves. I believe God seeks to make room and space for us, especially knowing how much the world, church, and home demand of Asian Americans. I am not proposing that process theology is the only or most authentic way of understanding God, nor am I advocating for a universal theology for Asian American Christians. Instead, I am proposing that process theology at its core can be reconciled with Confucianism and help Asian Americans branch out to embrace the diversity of our experiences and create the highest moral ideals.

Furthermore, by taking a process theological stance, Asian Americans can begin the process of untangling whether their beliefs on suicide or mental wellness align with their current theology. Process theology is clear in stating that suicide is not a sin, and from a process theological perspective, those who die by suicide are also not condemned to hell, unpardoned for their sins that violate God's law. Instead, process theology holds that God's vision for us never ceases but continues to evolve and grow with us, constantly integrating new possibilities and novel ways to experience transformation. In truth, "We are being saved over and over again,

[9] Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care*, 47.

feeling God's continual calling toward survival, justice, and quality of life, using each opportunity to become in higher and more intense forms than we did in the last occasion."[10]

Apart from this definitive stance in process theology, the philosophy of process thought provides language to think about and identify our feelings and experiences as Asian American Christians and to help us explore our understandings of God. Asian American Christians' understandings of themselves continue to evolve and change based on what they know, how they experience, and how they understand their experiences. Asian Americans can adopt parts of process thought that are helpful and parts that enhance their culture's valuable qualities, highlighting the perspective that our understanding of God is not fixed but is more of a process that evolves through time. The process perspective leaves room to capture the complexities of human experience, which can lead us to be more empathic and compassionate toward others and ourselves. Understanding God is a process that allows us to hear and explore other perspectives, deeper understandings, and a more compassionate view of God.

Disrupting the Legacy of Suicide among Asian Americans

A hopeful note from my research that is worth pointing out is that participants' narratives showed that younger generations might be more equipped than older generations for talking about mental health. It is a positive note that they attach less of a stigma to mental illness than do their parents.[11] Younger generations may be speaking out loud, but they are not speaking to their family members or people who can help. They may not initiate the talking, but as Asian American pastors, all the participants found it easier to speak openly and candidly with younger-generation Asian Americans about mental health. The possibility suggested by this of offering spaces to talk freely can be snatched away from young people when Asian American adults hold

[10] Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 169.
[11] Park et al., "Impact of Stigma on Use of Mental Health Services by Elderly Koreans," 757-66.

the power to hire a youth pastor whose theological stance mirrors their own views on God and faith.

Pastoral caregiving and education on mental health and suicide can open spaces for bringing life and a loving God back into the picture of beloved community. Younger generations can have positive and educational encounters with the topic of suicide when provided with the tools that help them to identify early in their lives the effect that the mixture of their cultural lenses and traditional theologies can have on their lives, directing their thoughts and giving them a false reflection of who God is and who they are.

Findings show that younger Asian Americans pick up beliefs and values about mental health (and perhaps God) similar to those their parents' generation have. Speaking about these topics can help other youth whose cultural backgrounds may discourage them from sharing openly. Discussing mental illness can be instrumental in aiding young Asian American Christians who are vulnerable to concealing suicidal thoughts and feelings and keeping them to themselves. Engaging with Asian American communities with appropriate measures that expose and educate younger-generation Asian Americans about community resources and a life-giving gospel can also have a generational impact. For these reasons, I find it helpful and culturally relevant for Asian American caregivers and pastors to use Bidwell's overview of prevention, intervention, and postvention care for children and youth who may be suicidal in Asian American Christian settings and to do so with a clear sense of how such children are part of the intricate web of their community and will need loving support from that community. Although there are no studies that confirm whether or not Asian American youth engage in HSI-like behaviors, it is possible, even likely, that some do. Hence, pastoral caregivers will have to be diligent, open, and explicitly clear in expressing their life-giving theological messages of God in

Asian American contexts. These religious leaders create supportive spaces that allow sharing to take shape, be witnessed, and be validated in a loving community of peers who are like family.

Asian American Christians can co-create novel ways to promote a life-giving God embodied through their words and actions. This God does not remain silent but persuades us to challenge the status quo as we experience it in our communities. As Coleman states, creative transformation may demand that we let go of things we are attached to, but that force is there for us to reckon with as the spirit that moves us beyond the stagnation of the past that will destroy us.[12] Utilizing process theology with Asian Americans also resonates with Coleman's womanist theological view that "making a way out of no way" means challenging the oppressive forces in the world and that God will work with us to make a path forward out of nothing, to cause unforeseen possibilities to emerge, and to enhance people's quality of life with liberation, life, and justice.[13]

Sharing Ou-ri Stories

Overall, the four distinct themes in this study point to the value of engaging in a spiritual care practice that promotes the sharing of stories. Stories are told from an ou-ri stance by involving other Asian American Christians as conversational partners. Ou-ri sharing or engaging in ou-ri care provides meaning and a sense of care where rigid boundaries are diffused and creative responses organically arise. The very act of sharing ou-ri stories in essence becomes an encounter (first theme) that helps to inform Asian American Christians' understandings of suicide. In a context where ou-ri care is advocated, the communal encounter with the topic of suicide can result in a positive experience where one begins to perceive and view suicide in a

[12] Monica A. Coleman, "An Exchange of Gifts: Process and Womanist Theologies," in *Handbook of Process Theology*, ed. Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006), 160–76.

[13] Coleman, "An Exchange of Gifts," 164.

different light. Rather than being situated in a context where usual responses like silence or fear can be instilled and observed in others' encounters with suicide, participants in ou-ri care are eased into a practice of telling ou-ri stories that is open, conversational, and shared. Encounter then becomes an intentional gathering of Asian American Christians who seek to break the silence surrounding suicide, and it offers a platform to hear ourselves out loud.

Encounters also serve as a way of tapping into the second theme of developing theological imagination. In community, Asian American Christians can actively work out and develop their own embedded theologies on suicide as well as hold ample space to hear other perspectives and theologies. Tensions and conflicts experienced during this time are an opportunity to place personal embedded theologies in dialogue with different, life-affirming theologies that may resonate better with one's personal lived experience. Encounters can serve as intentional times to work out one's theology and to embrace other, more helpful theologies that are pertinent to the real experiences of Asian Americans. Conscious theological work can increase the theological repertoire of Asian Americans and open theological imaginations.

The third theme of filtering the world through a culturally specific lens, which often pressures Asian American pastors to be "good" pastors or simplifies Asian American experiences to those of "good" Asian Americans fulfilling the model minority myth, can be dispelled by moving beyond a dualistic approach to interpreting contexts and situations. Filtering the world through a dualistic lens is a given for Asian Americans who come from collectivistic-minded cultures. Adopting more complex or ambivalent perspectives does not dismiss the power of the culture that forms how we interpret and view the world. Rather than minimizing the effects of the cultural lenses that shape how we view and interact with others, new perspectives

provide us with tools to see ourselves in relation to these lenses and give us the awareness to complexify the ever-increasing diversity of our human experiences.

Participating in the sharing of ou-ri stories within the collective promotes connection and relationship in the healing process of undoing the harm of silence about suicide in church contexts. Ou-ri care becomes a place of mutually sharing stories that capture all three themes that are always tied in relationship. Ou-ri care offers a communal way of responding to the absence of care for Asian American Christians. It is a care system that entertains a practice of spiritual care that is not individualistic or one-person-centered, but a collectivistic and familial way of providing care for multiple people simultaneously. Thus, spiritual care in the Asian American context is understood as communal spiritual care through which sharing ou-ri stories becomes a way to hear various perspectives, to engage encounters with suicide, and to embrace and develop lifegiving theological imaginations.

Pitfalls of Process Theology for Asian Americans

Process theology may seem cumbersome and heady, coming as it does from highly educated Westerners. Engaging in the development of one's theology involves active questioning of one's embedded images, ideas, and beliefs about God and one's relationship to the sacred. It takes critical thinking and understanding of the spontaneous and chaotic interdependent play of beings in this cosmos. Process theology beckons people to face their role and place in the universe and to take on the essential role of being participants and co-creators in bringing salvation, healing, and justice to the small and the grand and to all in between. Theological reflection can mean facing our own privilege and the oppression and harm we inflict on others as a result of our doing or not doing.

Some might argue that process theology's stance on sin, for example, may be too open and too forgiving for Asian American Christians to claim naively. For instance, process theology's stance on suicide as not being a sin can lead some to take a passive approach to reducing the number of suicides in society. Others, I imagine, will fear that such a nonjudgmental theology of suicide or assisted suicide will give rise to more people with suicide ideations taking their lives or to more individuals desiring to die by choice. For some, following a more traditional theology of a God who is outraged by people's immoral, irresponsible, and destructive decisions that are undertaken with complete disregard for their families is easier to accept. Oftentimes, love of such a God is based on fear. When people fear God's judgment, they are more likely to conceal actions deemed wrong and to be dishonest with themselves and others. And while I recognize that the power of culture to influence the dynamics of groups and relationships can overpower efforts to create change in such groups and relationships, I believe the power of an inclusive God can overpower those forces that would cause people to question their worth.

Between Process and Christian Confucian Theologies

Understanding that our well-being is intimately tied to the well-being of all, process theology challenges us to actively seek to lift those on the margins. It also encourages Asian Americans to move beyond shame and to name patriarchy, sexism, classism, racism, and so on as ideologies that skew and limit our view of our whole selves and others. In addition, by drawing on process theology, Asian American Christians can enhance our communal understanding of God in ways that are sensitive to our cultural contexts and the relics of the colonial beliefs that no longer contribute to the life-giving work of God's true vision for us.

Process theology opens our minds and hearts to perceive others and this universe in a way that is loving and compassionate, like God.

Process theology works well with the Asian culture by embracing nature and by recognizing that all beings in the world are interconnected and inseparable. Process theology also holds that God's spirit is not limited to humans but resides in plants, rivers, and stars. I often feel a clamoring pressure to appear as though things are fine, but I have never experienced such a nonsensical weight or judgment when I have been present with nature. Not all profound events must be written in logical and analytical terms. There are essences and authentic experiences and visions that our limited resources cannot describe. I would assert that Asians do not need to abandon their cultural heritages or scapegoat shame as something that prevents us from experiencing wholeness. Process theology leads us to accept all the parts of our complex selves and all the parts of the people around us, and it opens us to novel ways of experiencing God's compassion, which might stir us to respond to the aching of this world. Thus, a religious practice of communally being in nature and enveloping oneself in nature could be a nonintrusive way for Asian American Christians to cultivate an attitude that welcomes multifaceted ways to connect with the divine. A silent meditation, walking on a nature trail, resting—all these acts can be part of ou-ri care that quiets our shame, grounds us in God, and promotes our wholeness. And these acts of ou-ri care are done with a community of fellow Asian Americans who reflect oneself more than one would like to admit at times. From the perspective of process theology, such acts of relational engagement and taking care of one another are acts of growing together.

Process theology also empowers the collective community to be a part of the process of breaking the silence surrounding suicide. Stories shared in safe settings can be an asset for lifting voices that have never been uttered or heard before. Sharing stories encourages us to engage in

caring for ourselves without taking on the unnecessary cultural baggage of needing to always put the community over our own needs. Process theology also encourages us to take the initiative in expanding the circle of care.

The process theologian in me propels me to offer my voice as it may be helpful and life-giving for people in other communities. My voice reflects a compassionate God moving me beyond the fear and the concern of going against the grain, beyond doubting my theological agency or power to create positive change. God seeks to persuasively transform those who are suffering and persistently tries to expand our communal body, which has often been invisible in society and stashed away as trivial. Our Christian mandate is to do no harm, and as a Methodist, I feel it is important to embrace the Wesleyan quadrilateral of experience, Scripture, tradition, and reason. This means welcoming the knowledge that comes from the social sciences and the wisdom within other faith traditions and their practices, which all enhance our way of being and interconnectedness, broadening our vision for ourselves.

Process-Relational Spiritual Care for Asian American Christians

I have stated the dire need for spiritual care that attends to the specific needs of Asian American Christians. I have advocated for process theology as a theological foundation for such care, since it is a theology that takes into account our past and what is presently possible, and it looks to the future with hope. Process theology helps us understand how our history, what is possible in this moment, and the endless possibilities God offers are woven together. It allows us to feel the sense of change in the world and positions us to move into the future with influences from our past and the possibilities available to us and helps us evaluate the factors that prevent this world from being the harmonious and creative space that God desires. Moreover, process theology helps us understand evil and suffering as built into the world's structure and human

societies. While process theology does not attribute evil or suffering to God, it does acknowledge that our choices and decisions to operate in ways that are divergent from God's calling toward love, life, and beauty influence all of us. In other words, we engage in harm when we deny our significant influence on others and the world. A lack of sensitivity to self and others also reflects our insensitivity to God, since God is found in the concreteness of life.

The process God offers Asian Americans an understanding of a God who feels with us, who persuades, who is responsive, and who is relational. God as a persuader allows Asian Americans to view and understand God as one who works toward greater goodness and beauty. God as responsive offers Asian Americans a view of how God is affected by our experiences and actions. God as relational allows Asian Americans to view God as one who is actively involved in our journeys. A process God also gives Asian Americans a foundation to move away from the dualism that privileges one over the other, male over female, whiteness over blackness, and fixedness over change. In this view, God is a dynamic force that helps us to debunk the usual ways of understanding the larger social systems of society and the world. Process theology provides an alternative perspective for interpreting one's lived experiences, which continue to change and shift according to new revelations and experiences. It challenges Asian Americans to integrate their lived experiences in the ever-changing flow of life. These experiences involve not only the mind, but the mind, body, and spirit, which are all intimately interconnected. Process thought provides a holistic approach through which Asian Americans can honor the many parts of themselves as they move toward healing and wholeness. Similarly, through sharing ou-ri stories and ou-ri care, Asian American Christians can become relational, responsive, and persuasive agents who change the legacy of silence surrounding suicide. They can become active agents of God's hope and vision who work concretely, personally, contextually, and relationally.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the implications of my research findings and addressed how process thought, a postmodern constructive theology, can serve as a conduit for analyzing and interpreting the lived experiences of Asian American Christians from a Christian perspective. Interpreting the four distinct themes (encountering suicide, developing theological imagination, filtering through a cultural lens, and sharing ou-ri stories) through the lens of process theology creates entryways to tackling the ambiguous or unhelpful theologies operating with a Confucian cultural lens in Asian churches. Thus, process theology can help Asian American Christians create novel spaces for themselves and others to debunk and deconstruct old views and develop ideas, images, and language that mirror the experiences of Asian Americans. I have provided practical suggestions and ways to expand from the Asian American community's one-dimensional understanding of suicide to diversifying the lived experiences of suicide. Rather than allowing shame to permeate our culture, I have advocated for a theology that generates creativity and emboldens us as a community to claim physical and spiritual spaces for Asian Americans to grow as ou-ri.

At the same time, I recognize that one of this research project's limitations is that the breadth of diversity and gifts to be celebrated within Asian American Christian communities cannot be represented by a few Asian American pastors willing to share their understandings of suicide. I also recognize that the term *ou-ri* can be viewed as exclusivist because it only captures the experiences of Asian Americans and it omits the interdependent relationships we have with all beings and the world. It should be noted, then, that the term *ou-ri* must grow in its meaning to expand into a circle that embraces and promotes diversity, as opposed to a singular group of people. My study was limited to thick narratives of Asian American Christian pastors'

experiences and understandings of suicide, specifically those of Korean, Japanese, and part Japanese United Methodist clergy serving in the Western jurisdiction, which includes the states of California, Oregon, Washington, and Hawaii.

As such, my study was limited to representing a small number of Asian American pastors in the Western United States. To my knowledge, there has not been a study that ties the field of practical theology and interdisciplinary fields with an understanding of the lived experiences of Asian American Christians on suicide. My qualitative results have provided insight into Asian American Christians' embedded theologies of suicide. By delving into the narratives of Asian American Christian participants, this study has shown that, despite Asian American pastors holding a range of theological perspectives on suicide, from traditional to progressive, Asian American pastors are not always positioned to step away from Asian cultural expectations of them as pastors. Thus, closely relating to others in a collectivistic, Confucian mindset can, at times, only shed light on the model minority myth that plays a role in Asian American pastors' trying to fulfill the role of the "good" Asian American pastor. Rather than clinging to a Confucian philosophy that emphasizes rigid and fixed rules of how Asian Americans must act within their social hierarchy, Asian Americans can draw on process theology or other postmodern constructive theologies, like feminist or womanist theologies, to help them focus on such moral ideals and values as an ethics of care, self-growth, and moral judgment.[14]

Finally, in the future, it would be encouraging to have a study of the lived experiences of Asian American Christian suicide loss survivors that could provide us with greater insights for developing a better model of caring for and reaching out to people. It would also be interesting to

[14] Juliana Batista, "The Confucianism–Feminism Conflict: Why a New Understanding Is Necessary," Schwarzman Scholars, August 29, 2017, https://www.schwarzmanscholars.org/events-and-news/confucianism-feminism-conflict-new-understanding-necessary/.

study Asian pastors' theologies of suicide to see if the four themes of this study also apply to Asian pastors or just to Asian American pastors. While my findings may not be generalizable to Asian faith leaders in homogenous Asian societies, this study has important implications for Asian communities. This study challenges the applicability of current models of care by showing how cultural underpinnings and worldviews influence what practices can meet the needs of Asian Americans and help them address mental health issues impacting Asian Americans in the US today. My research has raised questions about the current theologies common in Asian American communities, which are influenced by a cultural lens that does not leave room for communities to respond but causes them to remain silent. Thus, I challenge Asian American Christians to remove the harmful and irrelevant theologies embedded in our communities, cultures, and bodies and make room for diverse experiences, voices, and stories to be lifted high and made visible. Based on my findings, I have also proposed responding to the culturally specific needs of Asian American Christians by embracing cultural concepts such as the collectivism of ou-ri ("we") as assets in overcoming the barriers that hinder Asian Americans from seeking care or receiving help. I suggest that Asian Americans need to take an active part in responding to the crisis of suicide by engaging in care practices, such as sharing ou-ri stories, that break the pattern of silence in Asian American communities.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

My therapist, my advisor, and others who knew me well encouraged me to post an image or words on my wall that I could keep returning to that would motivate me to continue writing until I completed this project. I debated for the longest time what to put up and finally decided to post a photo of myself as a six-year-old, in which I look very much like my now seven-year-old son. I've set this photo aside to quietly to look at every day. In my mind, six years of age is the juncture where my life unraveled. I remember a version of myself before this time in relation to who I have become since then.

As sometimes happens, I had an epiphany during one therapy session that helped me finally understand from my inner being how my early experience with sexual abuse changed me. With learned helplessness in a foreign land, I ultimately lost the ability to speak. I lost or forgot who I was when power was used against me. I lost who I thought I knew. I lost who I could have been. I lost who I was. Even at the cost of losing myself, I learned to survive by following people's orders even better. My *nunchi* skills increased—*nunchi* is a "Korean concept signifying the subtle art and ability to listen and gauge others' moods.[1] That alone could have been enough. Instead, my religious and cultural background, combined with my gender and skin color, inadvertently fueled my need to appease those around me for the greater good, a more excellent outcome, and a better future.

I began this work to question the legitimacy of the concern Asian churches had for Asian Americans dying of suicide when the numbers are uncomfortably high. I was interested in going beyond church models and strategic planning on quantitative member expansion. I wanted to learn how churches could address the mental health issues of Asians in Asian American churches

[1] Wikipedia, s.v. Wertz, *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*. last modified May 30, 2022, 21:25, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Nunchi&oldid=1090694194.

when such churches are often criticized for working from a paradigm of "seeking prosperity based on the model of American capitalism and commercialism."[2] Furthermore, I wanted to find out what theological resources were available to bring messages of healing when my experience and the experiences of so many Asian American Christians are tucked aside for the greater whole. When it became apparent that virtually no qualitative research sought to understand these patterns among Asian American Christians, this work became a journey to discover the missing voices of Asian American Christians' lived experiences of suicide.

Thus, my research question, "What is the embedded theology of suicide among Asian American pastors in Asian American faith contexts?" was driven by a desire to raise the volume on pastors' understandings of suicide and to break the culture of silence surrounding suicide. To do this research, the practical theology discipline in conversation with various social sciences and a hermeneutics of suspicion gave me the framework to situate myself and trust my lived experiences and the experiences of other Asian American Christians in order to deepen our way of viewing the situation and also become empowered to create transformative change.

Asian American experiences are indeed different socioeconomically and historically from non-Asian ones. My literature review of Asian studies was eye-opening in that, although Asian Americans have been a part of American history since the beginning of the competition to build the first transcontinental railroad in the US, academic interest in the lived experiences of Asian Americans has been scarce.[3] Similar to the erasure of Asian American history from textbooks, there was a lack of research on Asian Americans. Interestingly, there was almost double the number of studies on the model minority stereotype compared to the number of studies on other topics related to Asian Americans. As much as Asian Americans do not want to be labeled as the

[2] Hahn, "South Korea," 534-543.
[3] Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Asian American Histories of the United States* (Boston: Beacon, 2023), xi.

model minority, the attention Asian Americans receive in terms of the model minority stereotype is humorous and problematic. It shows that the formidable force of the model minority myth is intertwined with Asian Americans' experiences.

Thus, the number of studies on mental health care for Asian Americans was low and the number even lower for suicide interventions for Asian Americans that meet their culturally unique needs. Unfortunately, studies show that families whose loved ones have died of suicide, as compared to an accident or non-suicidal death, report experiencing more guilt, shame, and blame.[4] Only a handful of studies have examined the effect of an older adult's suicide on relatives and friends, while much more work has been done on grief and bereavement.[5] Moreover, studies on the impact of suicide on the family has shown that many survivors' bereavement post-suicide is challenged by perceived judgment and shame, profoundly affecting family members' connections with their social networks.[6] At the same time, Asians' low usage of mental health services has suggested that cultural barriers, such as stigma, religious beliefs about mental illness, and maintaining one's family's reputation, serve as a vital aspect for understanding Asian Americans' experiences and their contexts.

Conversely, a few suggest that working closely with Asian churches, temples, and community centers is important for reaching the Asian community more extensively in order to provide education and to disseminate resources; this also means translating resources into each community's first language.[7] In community networks, pastors are seen as gatekeepers and

[4] Barbara J. Nelson and Thomas T. Frantz, "Family Interactions of Suicide Survivors and Survivors of Non-Suicidal Death," *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 33, no. 2 (1996): 131–46, https://doi.org/10.2190/3AQ4-KUQE-KJ4R-8Q89.

[5] Julie Cerel, John R. Jordan, and Paul R. Duberstein, "The Impact of Suicide on the Family," *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention* 29, no. 1 (January 2008): 38–44, http://dx.doi.org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/10.1027/0227-5910.29.1.38.

[6] Cerel, Jordan, and Duberstein, "Impact of Suicide on the Family," 39.

[7] Wynaden et al., "Asian Communities' Access to Mental Health Care," 93.

experts on religion and spirituality, frontline workers like mental health counselors.[8] But clergypersons' exposure to suicidal persons, frequency of identifying and assessing the risk of suicide, and referral rates for suicidal persons have been low. Researchers have found either a lack of training or a self-reported lack of confidence among clergypersons in terms of suicide.[9] It is unknown whether those who seek out clergy as mental health specialists receive help or are hindered by their churches. One future research direction that has been suggested is a study of whether loss of face and shame are important mechanisms underlying HSI among Asian Americans.[10]

I found a running theme in my research of how shame around suicide made it very difficult for people to reach the Asian community. The psychosocial literature helped me identify specific factors and risks affecting Asian Americans. The pastoral theological resources I discovered took an interest in the practices of care in ministry and of meaning-making on a person's bereavement journey, naming everything from disenfranchised grief to complicated grief. But theological resources on suicide primarily targeted the white audience, so there were limited resources for culturally specific care for Asian Americans.

Using a qualitative phenomenological research methodology and interviews as my main method, I gained an in-depth understanding of issues surrounding suicide in Asian American communities and Asian American pastors' embedded theologies of suicide. Since I conducted my study during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I used an online conference video platform along with follow-up interviews for clarification.

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[8] Potter, "Is Suicide the Unforgivable Sin?," 15.

[9] Karen E.Mason et al., "Clergy Referral of Suicidal Individuals: A Qualitative Study," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 65, no. 3 (2011): 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1177/154230501106500304.

[10] Frederick T. L. Leong, Joyce Chu, and Shashank V. Joshi, "Guest Editors' Introduction to Special Issue on Advancing Our Understanding of Suicide among Asian Americans," *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 9, no. 4 (December 2018): 247–51, http://dx.doi.org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/aap0000148.

Contrary to my assumptions, Asian American pastors essentially had an open and inclusive view and understanding of suicide. Many shared being inculcated with teachings growing up in Christian households that to die of suicide was sinful. Moreover, while many began their theological journey with a traditional or classical theology background, their encounters increased their receptivity to move away from a punitive God toward a concept of a loving and forgiving God. To my surprise, although they are seen as gatekeepers and are highly revered as faith leaders in Asian American contexts, Asian American pastors faced a significant impediment to using their power to lead their congregations toward destigmatizing the stigma of suicide. This obstacle was how they felt they had to filter their authority as leaders through a culturally specific lens that is based on their East Asian backgrounds and that mirrors not only traditional theologies but also the ideologies and values of Confucianism. Asian American pastors in Asian American churches are careful to relate to their congregations in culturally appropriate ways, which often means staying and working within cultural norms familiar to Asian Americans. Confucian influences such as saving face and filial piety, along with a societal and cultural bias toward stereotyping Asian Americans as model minorities in their broader communities, all come into play.

Thus, my findings showed that Asian American pastors face similar challenges and barriers as they navigate through working in Asian American churches. Often, pastors are perceived as leaders and role models who represent their churches in the community, and this can pressure them to operate in ways that do not leave much room for mistakes. My research participants' experiences showed a lack of incentive to step away from cultural norms if such a move might negatively affect their authority and role as a pastor and potentially influence the well-being of the church congregation. Pastors were sensitive about not pushing the boundaries

in a way that would upset the elders of the church family and the congregation's cohesion, and they made sure they acted in ways that met the congregation's needs in a culturally sensitive manner. On that thread, the values of Confucianism played a role in the community's understandings of what is perceived as shameful, and these understandings are embedded in Asians' experiences. Yet, with these barriers, Asian American pastors were always open to being, and expressed a need and a desire to be, more vocal and explicit in their sharing about mental illness and suicide in the church.

On another positive note, findings showed that pastors placed great value on transcending the dichotomy beyond dualistic terms and embracing the in-between liminal spaces. They were open, then, to an approach that would allow them to deconstruct previous beliefs and integrate past perspectives with new ones. Stemming from their lived experiences of not having had such spaces, several participants repeatedly shared the need and the desire to create spaces where people were given the freedom to question and to grieve and where they could share their struggles and experience loving support and communal healing. Since so many Asian American Christians have to adapt to and live in two or three worlds on a daily basis, I believe they are aching for spaces where they can bring their whole selves—the full spectrum of who they are—and not have their suffering, sadness, and pain of internalized shame denied or silenced.

Asian American pastors are in a precarious position of needing to be peace keepers and maintain the relational harmony of their church members and staff in their Asian American churches. While Asian American pastors can certainly elicit the congregation's permission to be vulnerable and open through their role-modeling or teachings through sermons, it can also adversely affect their role as a pastor when a situation unfolds badly, and they will be hesitant to take such a risk again. Such disruptive incidences that occur between Asian American pastors

and their congregations demonstrate more clearly the expectation to be a "good" pastor according to certain cultural norms. Unfortunately, this expectation, its reinforcement, and striving to become a good pastor places a heavy burden on Asian American pastors, especially women pastors. They constantly live under a spotlight of impossible standards.

Asian American pastors' dance of filtering their context, role, and authority through an Asian cultural lens can be demanding and limiting. But, as my findings show, suicide encounters met with intentional theology to challenge embedded theologies can offer a shared language to tackle not only suicide but also other complex topics that are often not discussed. In this vein, a postmodern process theology that reflects the values of Eastern cultures can serve as a lifegiving alternative theology that offers the tools for Asian Americans to unearth their embedded theologies, and it can increase their theological imaginations of God in a way that prevents them from shaming people and responding to people's suffering with silence.

Ou-ri Care as Movement Toward Life-Giving Theology

Asian American Christians frequently carry a burden of intergenerational pain from living under a shadow of invisibility in the US and striving to reach the ideal of the American dream. Through ou-ri care, Asian American pastors can assert a pastoral stance on suicide that aligns with their working theology. They can create open spaces by explicitly sharing their own ideas and inviting fellow Asian American Christians to begin pondering the concept of a loving and compassionate God that is not based on cultural and transmitted religious teachings and assumptions but is drawn directly from their own lived experiences. In that vein, process theology offers a beautiful way to embrace our Asian history and our ou-ri mindset, which can lead to relinquishing the effects of racism and other harmful tragedies that are connected with theologies developed by Eurocentric men. Out of that ou-ri mentality, faith leaders may be

stirred to create spaces where Asian Americans have the permission to feel and to be with their church siblings as they care for one another through sharing and listening to ou-ri stories.

Ou-ri care, which takes on a relational and communal approach to healing and understanding ourselves and our relationship with God, can be a more relevant approach to preventing, intervening, and preventing suicide in Asian American communities. It aligns with an ethic of care that is not individualistic but communal and relationally collectivistic at its core. Its emphasis on the interdependent web of relationships that constitutes the world affirms the value and worth of every single person, every single moment, and every single experience. Undergirding this theme lies a recognition that the healing and salvation of one is tied to the reconciliation with all things and all beings with one another. The ou-ri care approach understands the implications of how one's actions and decisions can contribute to the wellness or suffering of other people and creatures now and in the future.

Ou-ri takes the well-being of others seriously, but not more seriously than one's own well-being, even to the extent of sacrificing one's resources to extend care to another. It parallels with the God of process theology who patiently and always makes Godself available to us and who works toward the wholeness of all things here in the present and takes into account all the possibilities of the future. Thus, it can be said that "process theologians, on the whole, agree with feminist, womanist, liberation, and ecological theologians who assert that salvation is communal in nature, reflecting the significance of relationships in this life and, possibly, the next."[11] Likewise, "In the spirit of the Wesleyan tradition of theology, God's prevenient, or prior, grace embraces all creation, inspiring our growth toward fidelity and wholeness even when we are not consciously aware of it."[12]

[11] Epperly, *Process Theology*, 136.
[12] Epperly, 140.

Process theological approaches to spiritual care also reflect the recognition of the incredible number of lives lost to suicide in our past and of those people who are actively struggling and are hidden in our midst. Process theological care would acknowledge how we have played a role in their suffering of each person who has died by suicide, in ways we know or not. Taking on such a process theological approach, we must work to redeem the suffering of all those who have lost their lives to suicide, with or without our knowledge. God has already redeemed them, but we, ou-ri, must take on the role of thrusting forward new and creative ways to respond to their pain through actions that promote care for those who are currently struggling with suicide. Hopefully, ou-ri care will then continue as a force to help all of us as a community and as inhabitants of this earth to take an active and creative role in responding to those suffering in our midst due to unjust systems that overlook those on the margins. Process theology provides resources for pastoral caregivers and receivers that can break cycles of harm and heal and transform our whole selves. And it is through ou-ri care that we as a body come to understand that God is revealed not only in certain times but in all times in all God's interactions with the world.

Ou-ri care from a process theological stance can be a helpful form of spiritual care for Asian Americans because it involves an openness to be influenced by the other and by God's vision. The benefits of spiritual care can be witnessed when more than one person is engaged in caring practices that lead to healing, in a place where one can simply be present and held with love and compassion. Ou-ri spiritual care would involve at least two care-seekers who then become two caregivers, caring for themselves and for one another. In this approach, care-seeking would take the form of sharing ou-ri story, in essence, one's lived experience of suicide, which impacted not only the individual but also the entire community that one is a part of. This story

would be shared with another person who then also shares their lived experience of suicide or mental illness. Through the act of mutually sharing lived experiences that are authentic, people are able to voice their own feelings and perspectives while also learning about others' experiences. This leads to greater understanding of the diversity of life experiences people have.

By involving at least two people engaged in both care-seeking and caregiving (through sharing ou-ri stories), ou-ri care would not take on the usual form of therapeutic relationships where there is one caregiver and one care-seeker. Ou-ri care would involve at least two people who become a "we." It is not limited to two people, but ou-ri care can only exist through two people engaging in ou-ri care. In this approach to spiritual care, the care-seeker in the relationship also becomes a caregiver and vice versa for the other person. Essentially, both people mutually receive and offer care. Because there is more than one person involved in the act of care, which becomes communal care, ou-ri care is a culturally permissible and acceptable way to be transformed theologically and spiritually.

Communal ou-ri care can become a practice where one's lived experiences are mutually shared in communion with others. Ou-ri care transforms communities into creative spaces where individuals are open to being influenced by others, which then can increase their theological imagination and lead to spiritual care that is culturally nuanced to respond to the silence of suicide. By sharing in ou-ri stories and voicing their lived experiences, Asian American Christians can disrupt the unhelpful narratives of the past and create opportunities to transcend unhealthy cultural and theological assumptions.

Areas for Further Research and Recommendations

I offer this study as a starting point for Asian American Christians to consider ways that attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors surrounding suicide can be shifted and moved in a direction that

can help those in our communities considering or affected by suicide. I wonder how other pastors can translate this study into Asian countries like Korea and Japan. Would more homogenous groups like Koreans, who are clear on cultural norms, have an easier or harder time accepting a progressive and open theology that is sensitive to their cultural context? Korean practical theologians have focused much on issues related to pastors or on providing Christian education in pop culture and multicultural settings. However, they also echo a pattern of creating new paradigms to "help the church sustain its growth," which can be discouraging for Christians seeking new ways of relating to God, the church building, and their community.[13]

As per good practice, Asian American pastors should be more sensitively placed in congregations. For example, when appointing Asian American United Methodist pastors, especially female pastors, to Asian American churches or communities, denominational leaders should take into account the difficulties for Asian Americans of serving traditional Asian American churches that reflect Confucian values. From a Confucian filial ideal standpoint, "sacrifice is intrinsic to the Asian woman's life," which can disproportionately put women clergy in positions of valuing others' well-being ahead of hers.[14] Furthermore, with the expectations placed on Asian American pastors to fit the perceived model of what a "good" Asian American pastor should be like, Asian American pastors may be more vulnerable than other pastors to burnout, depression, and being a target of tokenism.

My own United Methodist denomination needs to reconsider its description of its stance on suicide, as well as euthanasia, and reword it to better reflect the Wesleyan God. If our denominational theological stance is first and foremost to fulfill the mandate, "first do no harm," then it must have a clear stance on not only suicide but on voluntary euthanasia or physician-

[13] Hahn, "South Korea," 66.
[14] Kim, *Invisible*, 38.

aided death. Such a stance should reflect a clear theological view that does not nullify a belief in God's love for us. For if truly nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39), then nothing in this lifetime that deters or steers us away from God's vision and care for us can take us away from God's always seeking wholeness "in this life and the next, regardless of the circumstances of our deaths."[15] A denominational theological stance on physician-assisted suicide can arise to recognize the intersections of global systems, racism, and broken health-care systems and how they affect vulnerable people. It can give special attention to the need for social justice for those vulnerable to harm and hatred in this world and for the voiceless we fail to listen to. And it can call us to love and respect all people, individually as well as communally.

Suggestions and recommendations for Asian American Christian churches based on my research include hosting frequent, local mental health conferences and workshops so Asian Americans can have positive encounters with difficult mental illness topics in order to break unhelpful patterns. For process theology to be culturally relatable in Asian American communities, a resource containing case vignettes could be created that shows how Asian American pastors may begin conversations about process ideas or respond to people's questions and concerns with a process theological perspective. Another way to care for Asian Americans would be to provide a national or religious hotline specifically for Asian Americans, like the one that has been established for Native Americans in Washington.[16] Services provided on the hotline can come from people who recognize the implications of traditional theology and Confucianism for Asian Americans. I would also recommend more extensive quantitative and

[15] Epperly, *Process Theology*, 111.

[16] PJ Randhawa, "Washington Launches First of Its Kind Native American Crisis Hotline," K5, November 10, 2022, https://www.king5.com/article/news/community/facing-race/washington-launches-native-american-crisis-hotline/281-b5a4b774-2440-4b83-aeb9-6dfc746e8b70.

qualitative research studies that gather culturally specific and contextually rich descriptions and data that will expand our understanding of all the individual Asian Americans in our midst.

Lastly, I end with this: If the summation of my life experiences had not led me to this point, I could not have made it thus far. Through writing this dissertation, I am not the person I was when I began this research. Fortunately, through this research, I believe I found my voice. In finding my voice, I am no longer powerless nor helpless, so I no longer have to be complicit in maintaining the bindings that have contributed negatively to my life and my community. Practical theology has given me agency and the voice to speak from my experience and bring descriptions of Asian American Christians and their community leaders to the fore. It has helped me identify my social location, a place from which I can enter the disciplines of practical theology and the social sciences to gain a closer look at my life and social context. Engaging in the study and work of practical theology has given me the power to claim my voice, to take up space, and to no longer wait for permission to speak up, but to do so willingly for those who are unable to speak for themselves. I speak up for those we have lost to suicide too soon. I speak up for the young girl who stares back at me with newfound hope.

Appendix A: IRB Research Protocol

Claremont School of Theology

1. Date: March 6, 2021

2. Project Title: Asian American Pastoral Response to Suicide: Understanding Embedded Theologies of Asian American Pastors on Suicide

3. Name of Researcher:

a. Anna Cho
b. Practical Theology: Spiritually Integrative Psychotherapy
c. Duane R. Bidwell, PhD

4. Project Period: February 2021–June 2023

5. Proposed Funding: The project will be funded through the researcher's resources. No potential conflicts of interest exist.

6. Research Objective:

Little literature describes how Asian American clergy view suicide or offers resources for Asian American congregations encountering suicide as an issue in their communities. Yet, as pastoral theologians Loren Townsend and Daniel G. Bagby write, "From earliest human history, suicide and religions are inescapably joined."[1] While death and dying are not new concepts in faith communities, the stigma of suicide and outdated religious beliefs about suicide still haunts suicide-bereaved people and communities, hindering healing and abundant life. Historically, John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, viewed suicide as "self-murder," echoing Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, who saw suicide as a mortal sin.[2] More recently, the United Methodist Church has taken a more understanding stance; rather than equating suicide with self-murder or unforgivable sin, the church has deplored the condemnation of people who die by suicide. In 1992, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

[1] Loren L. Townsend and Daniel G. Bagby, *Suicide: Pastoral Responses*, Pastoral Responses. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 12.

[2] "Summa Theologica," accessed February 19, 2010, https://dhspriory.org/thomas/summa/.

implemented a faith-based initiative and partnered with faith organizations to train, equip, and provide resources for prevention, intervention, and postvention for suicide. Increased awareness from the social sciences, religion and other interdisciplinary spheres has informed many people's understandings of suicide and shown us that suicide touches nearly everyone in US culture. However, these insights have had little to no impact on Asian American faith communities, as evidenced by a lack of helpful resources to counter the silence surrounding suicide in these communities. Silence hinders faith communities from adequately and compassionately providing ongoing spiritual care for survivors in the aftermath of the tragedy of suicide.

My objectives for this study are threefold. First, this project aims to listen to the embedded theologies of Asian American pastors regarding their understanding of suicide. Second, my research seeks to assess how these pastors' embedded theologies may manifest in their ministries and how faith communities receive care in light of sociohistorical stereotypes of the model minority. This dissertation argues that although Asian Americans are more likely to seek clergy support than mental health professionals, they are not receiving adequate responses to help them heal as individuals, family units, and congregations. Conversation partners for the narrative assessment include practical theology, suicidology, Asian American studies, pastoral care and theology, and process theology. Third, this study aims to respond theologically to these narratives by deconstructing embedded theologies and cultivating intentional theology to help faith leaders in Asian American faith congregations better address the silence about suicide and provide prevention, intervention, and postvention for suicide survivors, ultimately fostering healing that preserves life.

7. Summary of Procedures:

For this study, I will interview Asian American men and women who identify as Christian, are currently serving in a ministerial role in the Pacific Northwest region, and are willing to share their understanding of suicide. For this study, my primary qualitative research method will be interviewing. Through interviews, I will focus on the "human [lived] experience as a 'place' where the gospel is grounded, embodied, interpreted, and lived out."[3] To interpret and better understand theologically what is going on and how we might respond, I will use Richard R. Osmer's four theological tasks of practical theology as guideposts to answer these questions: What is going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond?

I have chosen interviewing as the primary method by which I, as the researcher, will attempt to understand the embedded theologies of pastors concerning the topic of suicide. This research project will involve interviewing, over the course of six to eight weeks, at least six men or women of Asian American descent who identify as Christian pastors within a Christian faith context. Demographic information, such as age, race, gender mix, and education, will be included in written form. All participants will be given a consent form two weeks before the interview so participants can review the consent form, ask questions, and collaborate on the best way to protect their identity. If changes need to be made, revised consent forms will be drafted to reflect the changes necessary for the interview. Participants can choose to receive a hard or digital copy of the consent form once the participant and researcher sign it.

The interviewer and the interviewee will mutually assess the best place to hold the interview to minimize interruption and loud noises and to protect confidentiality. I, as the researcher, will empower participants by including them in this decision-making. It is important

[3] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative* Research (Long Lane, London: SCM Press, 2006), 5.

that participants share their personal narratives in a place where they feel relatively safe. Interviews may occur in a campus library (study room) or private homes through a virtual platform. Interviews will each run between sixty and ninety minutes, understanding that follow-up interviews may be requested. They will take place during a mutually agreed-upon time and will be digitally audio-recorded using an iPhone voice recorder.

Participants will be given the autonomy to share as much as they want. If at any point, they would like to stop the interview, I will turn off my iPhone voice recorder and stop the interview. All data collected in the study will be treated with utmost care to protect the identity of the participants. Digital recordings on my iPhone will be password protected until later transferred to my personal laptop computer, which is also password protected. Copies on the iPhone will be permanently deleted once this transfer is complete. The researcher will transcribe interviews, with transcriptions stored on my password-protected personal laptop computer. All data pertaining to the study will be stored in password-protected files. All hard copies and backup files will be stored in a locked briefcase on a USB thumb drive. As the researcher, I will be the only person with access to the combination for unlocking the briefcase that holds sensitive materials. All materials collected during the research will be permanently deleted by May 31, 2025. During the interview, participants will be provided with water, tissues, and access to a restroom.

Tentative Interview Questions

Interviews will follow a semi-structured format responsive to the content articulated by participants. I will ask appropriate follow-up questions to ensure understanding and generate a rich description. Possible questions include the following:

- What is your understanding of suicide?
- How do you feel about suicide?

- How was suicide talked about in your family and community of faith when you were growing up?
- Do you remember an occasion when a pastor talked, preached, or taught about suicide?
- Can you tell me about a time when you provided spiritual care to someone who was suicidal?
- What kind of resources would have been helpful for you?
- How often do you preach or educate on the topic of suicide?
- How do you believe suicide survivors feel in their faith communities?
- How does your theology inform your understanding of suicide?
- Do you believe those who die by suicide are usually mentally ill?
- What do you believe happens to a person who has died of suicide?
- What do you say to a suicide survivor?
- How would you spiritually care for those who have experienced a significant loss, and how is your care different for those close to someone who has died of suicide?
- What are unhelpful themes around suicide that linger in your faith community?
- What are the barriers to talking more openly about suicide?
- Is suicide a difficult subject for you? Why or why not?
- How would your congregation respond to a suicide?
- What prominent cultural beliefs are evident in your ministerial setting around mental illness and suicide?

- What notable religious beliefs around suicide are evident in your ministerial context?
- Do you have an idea of what your denomination's stance is on suicide? Your colleagues' stance?
- What role did your family play in your ability to talk about mental wellness? Were there any communication barriers?
- What was the most encouraging statement you heard growing up that you remember to this day? What was the most hurtful statement you heard about suicide?
- How do you feel about encouraging others to attend suicide bereavement groups (as opposed to general bereavement support groups)?
- What could churches do to help suicide loss survivors?
- How do you feel in general about seeking care from mental health professionals?
- How would you prepare the funeral ritual similarly or differently for the deceased?
- How does shame play a part in Asian American cultures in relation to suicide?
- How does stigmatization or taboos surrounding mental wellness and illness play a part in our society today?
- Are there any questions you would like me to ask that have not come up yet?

8. Research Population:

Because my research involves the lived experiences and understandings of suicide among Asian American Christian pastors, all six participants will first identify themselves as of Asian American descent. They will self-identify as Christian and as currently serving in a ministerial

context. All participants will be 18 years of age or older. I have three personal acquaintances who may be open to participating in this study. I will seek three more participants through networking with clergy of Asian American churches in the Pacific Northwest. If unsuccessful, I will connect with Asian American churches in the US to recruit potential participants willing to participate in this study. Another possible route I will take is to seek volunteers through a social media platform such as The Asian American Christian Facebook page. Most participants will be in the Portland metropolitan area but may live anywhere in the Greater Pacific Northwest region. Participants will be informed of the full risks and potential benefits of participating in this research two weeks before the interview. They will receive, review, and sign an informed consent document before the interview. The consent form will include a list of mental health referrals, hotline numbers, and resources for those who might need additional debriefing. I will close each interview with a body scan and muscle relaxation meditation to help prevent aversive reactions to the interview conversation.

9. Identifiable Risks:

I am cognizant of the reality that participants may not have had many opportunities to share their understanding of suicide openly. Although being heard and listened to can be healing and validating in some cases, it can also risk triggering thoughts, feelings, and psychosomatic symptoms that might surface during and after the interviews. I will need to be mindful of reading nonverbal cues and take breaks if needed. Should the participant choose to take a break, their decision will be respected, and the interview will resume when ready. Study participants will be assured that if at any point in the study they should desire to withdraw from the research, they can do so without any penalty.

10. Protection of Participants' Privacy and Dignity:

a. Digital audio recordings of the interview data and other collected information pertaining to the study will be protected with a password on my personal laptop computer, and each digital file will be password protected. Extra steps will be taken to back up study materials on a password-protected USB thumb drive and stored them safely in a locked briefcase. My advisor, Dr. Duane R. Bidwell, and I will be the only two persons who will have access to the confidential materials.

b. All materials, including digital and audio recordings, will be permanently deleted by May 31, 2025. Identifiable information, such as name and age, will be changed in the dissertation to disguise the identity of the participants. Participants may select a pseudonym of their choice if they so desire. All names will be coded and masked with a pseudonym.

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Identification of Investigator and Purpose of Study

You are invited to participate in a research study titled "Asian American Pastoral Response to Suicide: Embedded Theologies of Asian American Pastors on Suicide." The research is being led by Anna Cho, a PhD student at Claremont School of Theology in the area of Practical Theology, Spiritual Care and Counseling: Spiritually Integrative Psychotherapy. This research was reviewed and approved by Claremont School of Theology's Institutional Review Board 1325 N. College Ave, Claremont, CA 91711. It is supervised by Anna Cho's dissertation committee, comprised of Dr. Duane Bidwell (Chair), Dr. K. Samuel Lee, and Dr. Frank Rogers.

This project seeks to understand Asian American pastors' understanding of suicide. The interview will center upon the interviewee's attitudes, perspectives, and experiences on the topic of suicide. The research aims to listen to the understanding of Asian American pastors on the topic of suicide so that the church can more respond to survivors of suicide in theologically sound and compassionate ways. The study aims to amplify the embedded theologies of suicide and demystify the stigma surrounding suicide within the Asian American culture. This dissertation argues that although Asian Americans are known to more likely to seek faith leaders rather than mental health professionals, Asian Americans are not receiving the adequate response needed to heal as an individual, family unit, and as a faith congregation in Asian American churches. My hope for this study is that by understanding Asian American pastors' views on suicide, church communities can play an integral role in addressing the silence of suicide and become a place of light in the darkness and stability in times of great pain.

You are free to contact the investigator or committee chair using the information below to discuss the study:

Anna Cho, Investigator
Phone: (503) 828-8221
Email: anna.cho@cst.edu

Duane R. Bidwell, PhD, Chair
Phone: (909) 447-2528
Email: dbidwell@cst.edu

The Interview Process

Interview Requirements for Research:

- The participant must be 18 years or older
- The participant must self-identify as Asian American
- The participant must self-identify as Christian
- The participant must self-identify as a Christian pastor, minister, or leader in a ministerial context
- The participant must live within the Pacific Northwest region

Participant: Please read this consent form carefully and ask as many questions as you would like before you decide whether you want to participate in this research study. You are free to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research.

What is the procedure?

You will be given a consent form two weeks prior to the interview so that you can review the consent form, ask questions, and collaborate with me on the best way to protect your personal identity. If changes need to be made, a revised consent form will be drafted to reflect the changes needed for the interview. If you consent, your involvement will require at least one and possibly more conversations in a mutually agreed-upon place. You will be asked to share in your own words your understanding of the topic of suicide as an Asian American Christian. The interview will last sixty to ninety minutes. I will ask open-ended questions and follow-up questions regarding your understanding, thoughts, feelings, and opinions on suicide in order to discern your operative theologies. I will also ask you to freely share your thoughts on how you have offered spiritual care in times of crisis. You are given the right to share as much as you would like or to refuse to answer questions. I will digitally audio-record the interview on my password-protected iPhone. All sensitive materials pertaining to the study will be kept confidential and stored on my personal laptop with password protection. Hard copies will be stored in a locked briefcase, and I will be the only person who has access to the combination to unlock the briefcase. All data collected throughout this study will be treated with utmost care to protect your identity. For my study, I will be using pseudonyms to disguise your identity. If you would like to choose your own pseudonym, we can also discuss the name of your choice. All materials collected during the research will be permanently deleted by May 31, 2025.

Please be assured that if at any point in the study you should desire to withdraw from the research, you can do so without any penalty.

What if I change my mind?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Before the interview, you will be made aware of the specific nature of the study, the purpose of the questions, the anonymity with which the findings will be used, and your right to discontinue the interview at any time. Additionally, I will end the interview by asking, “Do you have any questions for me?” At that time, you will be given the opportunity to voice further questions. You are free to refuse to answer any questions. If, at any time, you wish to withdraw from this study, you may do so

without any penalty. Simply let me know and I will respect your decision and permanently discard your information; it will not be used as part of the research.

Are there risks?

That is a great question. There are no known risks associated with this interview. However, it is possible that you might feel uncomfortable, anxious, sad, triggered, or provoked as we have a conversation about your particular experiences or understandings of suicide as a pastor. Please be assured that you can take a break, reschedule our interview, or choose to withdraw from the interview without feeling responsible and accountable to this study. Your whole health, which includes your emotional well-being, is of utmost importance. Please let me know if at any time you wish to take a break or stop participation.

Are there benefits?

Just as there are risks, you might also find there are benefits to participating in this research. It may be the case that you feel heard, validated, and listened to for the very first time as you share your thoughts and feelings. This study is intended to shed light on Asian American pastors' embedded theologies regarding suicide. Hopefully, this study will be informative about how pastoral caregivers, faith leaders, counselors, and faith communities can better partake in caring for suicide survivors in Asian American churches. Thus, your participation might benefit people in the future by helping improve congregational and pastoral responses to suicide survivors.

Will my identity be protected?

Absolutely. Your name will be kept confidential unless you let me know that you desire to use your real name. I will be the only person interviewing you and the only person who listens to your audio-recording. In my study, I will use pseudonyms—a fancy way of saying that I will use a made-up name for you. While I am transporting data from one location to another, you can rest assured that all of the data collected in this study will be secure and protected with passwords on my devices. I plan on holding your classified information until May 31, 2025, when all materials related to our interview will be permanently deleted.

There is a small possibility that my research study will be published or presented in a public setting, such as a workshop or conference. If that is the case, pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity.

Questions? Whom do I contact?

If you have any questions about the study or need to update your email address, contact the primary investigator, Anna Cho, at (503) 828-8221 or send an email to anna.cho@cst.edu. If you have questions about your rights or are dissatisfied at any time with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the chair of the Institutional Review Board by email at irb@cst.edu. Thank you.

Resources/Referrals/Books/Local Support Groups

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org
Phone: 1.800.273.8255

SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)
www.samhsa.gov

American Association of Suicidology (AAS)
5221 Wisconsin Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20015
Phone: (202) 237-2280 Fax: (202) 237-2282
www.suicidology.org Click on "Suicide Loss for Survivors" link

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
120 Wall Street, 22nd Floor New York, New York 10005
Toll-Free: (888) 333-2377 Phone: (212) 363-3500 Fax: (212) 363-6237 inquiry@afsp.org
www.afsp.org

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
2107 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 300 Arlington, VA, 22201-3042
Toll-Free: (800) 950-6264 Phone: (703) 524-7600 Fax: (703) 524-9094
www.nami.org

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention Center for Disease Control and Prevention
Mailstop K60, 4770 Buford Highway Atlanta, Georgia 30341-3724
Phone: (770) 488-4362 DVPINFO@cdc.gov www.cdc.gov

National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association
730 North Franklin Street, Suite 501 Chicago, IL 60654-7225
Toll-Free: (800) 826-3632 Fax: (312) 642-7243
www.ndmda.org

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) 6001
Executive Boulevard Rm. 8184, MSC 9663 Bethesda, MD 20892-9663
Phone: (301) 443-4513 Fax: (301) 443-4279 nimhinfo@nih.gov
www.nimh.nih.gov

Mental Health America
2000 N. Beauregard Street, 6th Floor Alexandria, VA 22311
Phone: (703) 684-7722 Toll-free: (800) 969-6642 TTY Line: (800) 433-5959
www.nmha.org

National Organization of People of Color Against Suicide (NOPCAS)
PO Box 75571 Washington, DC 20013

Phone: (202) 549-6039 info@nopcas.org
www.nopcas.org

SAVE – Suicide Awareness Voices of Education
8120 Penn Ave. S., Suite 470 Bloomington, MN 55431
Phone: (952) 946-7998
www.save.org

Suicide Prevention Action Network USA (SPAN USA)
1010 Vermont Avenue NW, Suite 408 Washington, DC 20005
Phone: (202) 449-3600 Fax: (202) 449-3601 info@spanusa.org
www.spanusa.org

Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program PO Box 644 Westminster, CO 80036
Phone: (303) 429-3530 Fax: (303) 426-4496 ask4help@yellowribbon.org
www.yellowribbon.org
www.FierceGoodbye.com

Baugher, B. & Joran, J. (2001). After Suicide: Coping with Your Grief.
Bloom, l. (1986). Mourning After Suicide.
Cobain, Beverly (2006). Dying to Be free.
Collins, J. (2003). Sanity and Grace: A Journey of Suicide, Survival and Strength.
Donnelly, K. (2000). Recovering from the Loss of a Sibling.
Dougy Center (2001). After a Suicide: A Workbook for Grieving Kids.
Goldman, l. (1996). Breaking the silence.
Joiner, Thomas (2005). Why People Die by Suicide.
Linn-Gust, M. (2001). Do They Have Bad Days in Heaven?: Surviving the Suicide Loss of a Sibling.
Miller, S. (2000). An Empty Chair: Living in the Wake of a Sibling's Suicide.
Myers, M. and Fine, C. (2006). Touched by Suicide: Hope and Healing After Loss.
Rubel, B. (2000). But I Didn't Say Goodbye: For Parents and Professionals Helping Child Suicide Survivors.
Williams, J. (1998). Cry of Pain: Understanding Suicide and Self-harm.
Wolfelt, a. (2000). Healing the Grieving Child's Heart - 100 practical ideas for families, friends and caregivers.
Wrobleski, Adina (1994). Suicide: Why? 85 Questions and Answers About Suicide.
Wrobleski, Adina (1994). Suicide: Survivors – A Guide for Those Left Behind.

Hope Bereavement Center; Willow Room
5400 MacArthur Blvd
Vancouver, Washington 98661

Westwood Baptist Church, Room E-10
333 Kaiser Road NW
Olympia, Washington 98502
www.auburnsos.com

Support After Suicide
LBCC Benton Center, Room 121
757 NW Polk Avenue
Corvallis, Oregon 97330
Kelly Boris
541-905-9787
kellyjboris@gmail.com

West Salem Suicide Bereavement Support Group
West Salem Clinic
1233 Edgewater NW
Salem, Oregon 97304
Jennifer Rothrock
(503) 871-5820
masbry@gmail.com

Suicide Bereavement Support Group
Clackamas County NAMI Office, Suite 501
10202 SE 32nd Avenue
Milwaukie, Oregon 97222
Andrea Campbell
503-774-4612
lionne1939@gmail.com

Suicide Bereavement Support Group
West Hills Friends Church
7425 SW 52nd Street
Portland, Oregon 97219
Kris Collins
(806) 654-4808
krispincollins@gmail.com

Suicide Bereavement Support
Peace House
2116 NE 18th Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97212
Georgena Eggleston
503-309-3966
georgenaeggleston@gmail.com

Suicide Bereavement Support Northwest
First Federal Bank
121 N. Edwards St.
Newberg, Oregon 97132

Terry Atwood
(503) 560-5199
terry0516@hotmail.com

Pauline Metoxen
(503) 537-6221
dcbk3@comcast.net

SOS Survivors of Suicide
www.schospice.org
Mia Fisher
541-269-2986

Bridges: A Center for Grieving Children
www.multicare.org/BRIDGES
Lisa Duke, MSW
253-403-1966
lduke@multicare.org

www.portlandtherapycenter.com

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I have read the information provided above. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Participant _____

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Address _____ _____

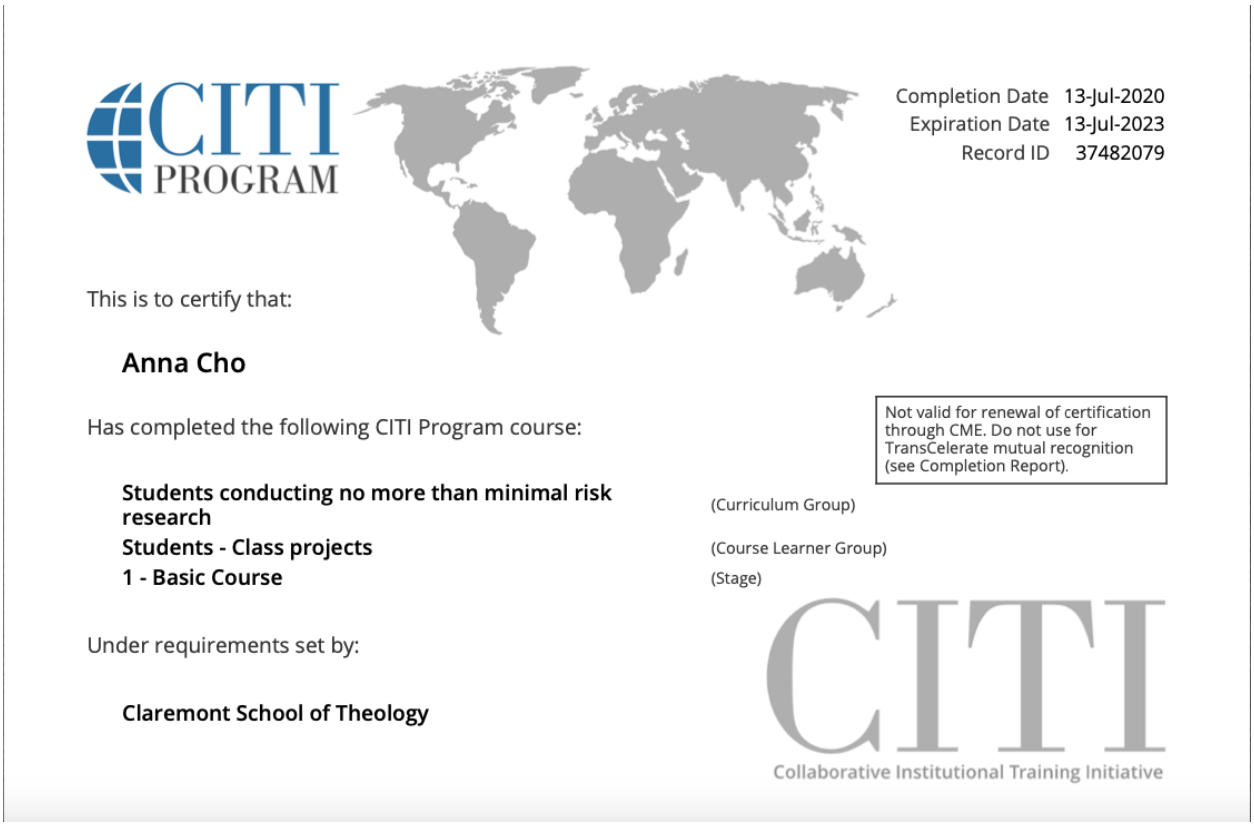
Phone _____ Email _____

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

_____ _____

Signature of Investigator Date (same as participant's)

Appendix C: Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Completion Report



CITI PROGRAM

Completion Date 13-Jul-2020
Expiration Date 13-Jul-2023
Record ID 37482079

This is to certify that:

Anna Cho

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME. Do not use for TransCelerate mutual recognition (see Completion Report).

Students conducting no more than minimal risk research (Curriculum Group)
Students - Class projects (Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course (Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Claremont School of Theology

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

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